

FIFTH EDITION.

Texas

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November 29, 1887.

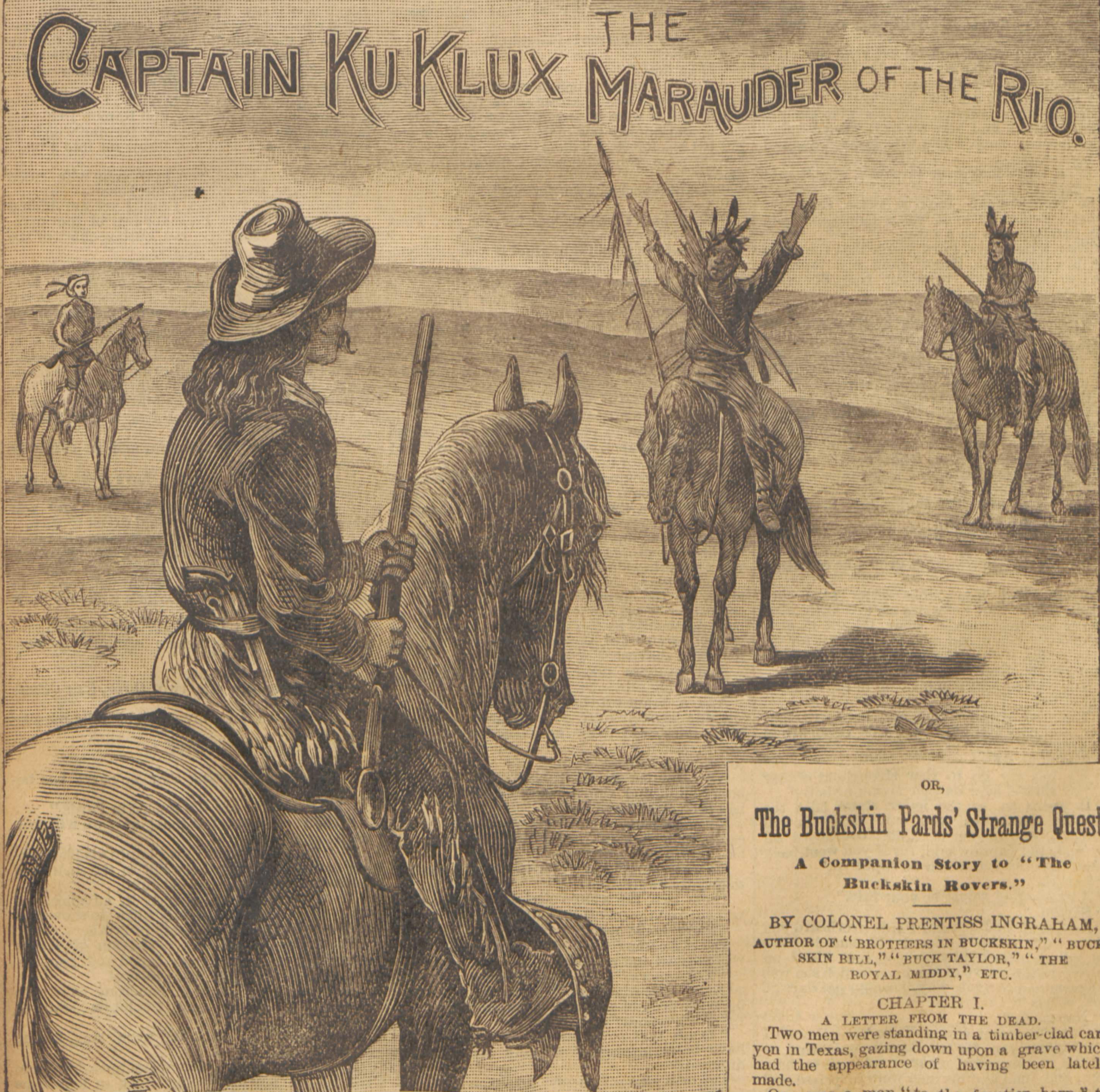
Vol. XXI.

\$2.50
a Year.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 540.



FROM THEIR POSITIONS SURROUNDING THE ASSUMED COMANCHE, THE BUCKSKIN PARDS
NOW ADVANCED, THEIR RIFLES READY FOR USE.

OR, The Buckskin Pards' Strange Quest.

A Companion Story to "The
Buckskin Rovers."

BY COLONEL PRENTISS INGRAHAM,
AUTHOR OF "BROTHERS IN BUCKSKIN," "BUCK-
SKIN BILL," "BUCK TAYLOR," "THE
ROYAL MIDDY," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A LETTER FROM THE DEAD.

Two men were standing in a timber-clad canyon in Texas, gazing down upon a grave which had the appearance of having been lately made.

One was a man "to the frontier born," to judge from appearances, for he was the thorough type of a Texan cowboy, tall, well-made, and

clad in hunting-shirt, leather leggings, and broad sombrero, while about his waist was buckled a belt holding a pair of revolvers and knife.

But his face was by no means prepossessing. He looked the thorough villain, and was one.

His companion was attired in a corduroy hunting-suit, wore a black slouch hat, and under his coat was the suspicion of arms, for a belt-buckle was visible in front.

He had top boots and spurs, and altogether was a striking looking personage, for he was tall, well-formed, and had a handsome face.

Whether a good man or a bad one his countenance did not reveal, for he kept his character hidden under a calm mask that nothing seemed to disturb.

The two had just passed through a severe and perilous ordeal, and yet the faces of neither of them revealed the fact.

In the background, handsomely saddled and bridled, were two horses, which had the appearance of having been hard ridden.

A rifle was slung to the horn of each saddle, and haversacks and a leather pouch, with tightly-rolled blankets, indicated that the men were out for more than a day's travel.

"Well, Tiger Tom, there is the grave, as the letter states, so it looks like the truth," said the man whose appearance indicated that he was a dweller in the marts of civilization, and not of the wild border.

"Yas, Pard Kent, and I'll jist read the letter again. It seems ter be readin' a letter from a dead man, and yet it looks like a squar' deal. Only last Sunday me and ther cap'n met over yonder in ther canyon, and he gi'n me my orders as usual, and here ter-day, when I comes to our meetin'-place, I gits this letter," assured the borderman.

"Well, let us look over it again, Tom," said the other.

The frontiersman took a letter from his pocket. Folded up in it was a handsome gold ring, in which was set a ruby.

"Ther letter says, Pard Kent, that the cap'n sent his lieutenant, Senor Juan and fourteen men, as agreed, ter wipe out ther Buckskin Brothers and the'r outfit."

"Yes, Tom."

"Now we knows that Juan and his men got wiped out, 'ceptin' a few as has gone on fer ther stronghold, by ther Buckskin Brothers, and ther woman and her maid, as you wanted kilt, and paid me ter hev done, wasn't hurt."

"Unfortunately that is true, Tom."

"Waal, ther cap'n were goin' ter ther Haunted Mission, ter see ef that ghost that hain't ther one as stands between him and a fortin', and he hed got to ther canyon, when ther Buckskin Pards jist captured him, and ther major and his sojers hanged him."

"The letter says the major had him shot, Tiger Tom, not hanged."

"Thet ar' so, Pard Kent, but he ar' dead, hain't he?"

"If you find him in that grave, he certainly is."

"Waal, Pard Kent, ther letter says ther major allowed him ter write me this letter, and leave it in ther canyon whar I'd git it, and, bein' as ther cap'n hed ter go, he left it for me ter be Chief o' ther Cowboy Pirit's o' ther Rio Grande in his place."

"Yes, and he sent you his ring in the letter as proof of it."

"Yas, here are ther ring, and here are ther letter, and now it's ter see if ther cap'n are in that grave."

"And if he is?"

"We has ter go to ther stronghold o' ther Cowboy Pirit's, over on ther Mexikin shore."

"It seems so, as the letter states that the Buckskin Pards, as you call those Powell Brothers, were hidden here, and overheard all you and the captain said, for if you went back to San Antonio you would be captured."

"Sart'in."

"And hanging would be your fate."

"Sart'in."

"And as those Buckskin Pards overheard you tell the captain that I offered a big sum to have that actress attacked by his men and killed on the way to the grave of her lover which she was so determined to visit, why, I would not dare go back, either."

"Not much."

"Our plans went wrong, Tiger Tom, though I do not blame you, for the Powells got wind of our plot in some way, secured soldiers to help them, and Juan and his men were surprised and whipped, where they meant to surprise and kill."

"It is lucky we hung in the background and

did not join in the attack, as we might have gone under."

"Now, neither you nor I dare go back to town, and I shall cast my lot with yours, and become a Cowboy Pirate."

"But let us see about what this grave holds."

"Done."

So saying, Tiger Tom went earnestly to work, and threw the yielding dirt out of the grave.

After a while he came to a human form wrapped in a serape.

This was opened, and a dark, sinister face was revealed.

"It's ther cap'n," said Tiger Tom, in a whisper.

"There is no doubt?"

"None."

"He was quite young."

"Yas, young, but awful bad."

"Well, fill in the grave again."

Tiger Tom obeyed, and then stood silently by it.

"What is to be done now?"

"Go ter jine ther Cowboys."

"And you will become their chief?"

"Pard, I hain't much on bein' a leader, and yet I'm thar ef it hes ter be."

"Is there no other officer, now that the captain and Juan are dead?"

"Yas, thar's another as they calls Senor Tomas."

"He may claim the leadership."

"Maybe."

"If he does?"

"He's gotter prove he's ther best man, though, as I told yer, I don't hanker ter be cap'n. Ther truth are, I were a spy in the towns fer ther cap'n, and mighty few o' ther boys knows me; but if I has ter be, I will."

"I'll give you a thousand dollars for your place."

"Meanin' ter be cap'n yerself?"

"Yes."

"They hain't one o' 'em knows yer, Pard Kent."

"It matters not; I'll be chief if you say you yield your right to me."

"Fer a thousand dollars?"

"Yes."

"It's a go!"

"Then come on, and we will soon know who is to rule the Cowboy Pirates."

With this they mounted their horses and rode away down the canyon toward the Rio Grande.

CHAPTER II.

THE HAUNTED RUIN.

It was a strange place for a woman to be, an old ruined chapel, about which the dead had been sleeping for nearly a hundred years.

And yet, looking ghost-like in her white garments, a woman stood amid the ruins, gazing out through a vista in the trees across the prairies.

A hill rising out of the prairie, a stream flowing around it and heavily timbered, the ruin was almost hidden in the sheltering foliage.

Men shunned the spot, red-skin and pale-face alike, for the inmates of the old Mission-house, the padres of the old chapel, both in ruins, had been massacred by the Comanches, and strange stories were told of ghosts of the murdered dead haunting the spot.

And yet there stood a woman in the midst of the decaying pile.

And a beautiful woman too, and young, for she was scarcely over twenty-three, and with large dark, sad eyes full of splendor and a mouth about which hovered an expression of touching sweetness.

Back further in the timber was a log cabin, lately built, and the indications that a camp had been established there.

But one person however was visible in the camp, and that was a peon who had seen his half century of years.

He was smoking a cigarito which he seemed to greatly enjoy.

These two, the white-robed form in the ruin, and the peon were all that were visible.

"Perez, come here!"

The call came from the woman and her voice was musical and ringing.

"Yes, senora," and the peon arose and walked to the spot where the woman stood, leaning upon the crumbling walls of the old Mission.

"Well, senora?"

"Is not that some one on the prairie, for I have been looking so steadily my eyes are dimmed?"

The man glanced in the direction indicated, and after a moment answered:

"A herd of buffalo, senora."

"Ah me! I hoped it was the party coming

back, for they should have returned ere this, Perez."

"It is time for them, senora."

"You do not think any harm could have come to them, Perez?" was the anxious query.

"Oh, no, senora, for the Senor Major had a score of soldiers with him, and then there were those four Buckskin Pards, as they call the two scouts, and their negro and Indian allies."

"Those Senor Powells are remarkable men, Perez?"

"Yes, senora, and the wicked men along both sides of the Rio Grande, and the Comanches, fear them greatly."

"I owe my happiness now to them, Perez, and I shall ever pray for their success."

"Yes, senora, their coming here to camp, as they did, unheeding all tales of the ruin being haunted, brought happiness to you again."

"I only hope my happiness is not doomed to slip from me, for, after all I have gone through, I hardly dare hope for joy, Perez."

"Don't feel that way, senora, for all will come well."

"I hope so, and yet how much I have suffered."

"How strange has been my life."

"A few years ago a happy Mexican girl, that noble American officer saved my life, and the life of the man I then expected to marry, and whom now is my bitterest foe."

"My parents sacrificed me for gold, by marrying me to the father of the man they at first intended I should wed, casting Ramon Delporte aside when they found that his father would disinherit him for his wild life."

"The wife of a man of seventy, I soon became a widow, my parents died, and Ramon Delporte, accusing me of stealing the fortune which he said should have been his, threw me into a madhouse."

"You, good Perez, you and your wife aided me to escape, and brought me here."

"Enormously rich as I am, I yet am hiding here like a hunted deer, for fear of that man, who is now San Cruz, the outlaw chief of the band of Rio Grande robbers."

"And here the Buckskin Brothers bravely came and found me, and here came Major Loring, the soldier who, then a lieutenant, saved my life, and who, having found me, has asked me to become his wife."

"Ah! strange indeed has been my life, Perez, and do you wonder that I dread evil now, when I know that Major Loring and those noble scouts have gone to hunt down my worst foe, Ramon Delporte, who calls himself San Cruz."

"Do you wonder that I fear sorrow instead of joy, Perez?"

"You are nervous, senora, and so run your thoughts to fear evil."

"Why, how strong you have been the two years you have dwelt here."

"I feared, after my poor wife died, and you were left here alone, you would dread to stay."

"Yet, each time that I have come, to bring your supplies, I have found you brave, yes, utterly fearless."

"Bear up now, senora, for all will come well and you will be the good major's wife and know joy in your later years."

"You are good to so cheer me, Perez, and—but see! those are horsemen coming, are they not?"

"Yes, senora, they are."

"See, there are one, two, three, four—those are all."

"Yes, senora, and my eyesight tells me who they are."

"The major, is he there?"

"No, senora."

"Blessed Mary grant that no harm has befallen him."

"Senora, those are the Buckskin Pards."

"Thank Heaven for that! now we will soon have news."

The four men were now plainly visible, coming straight on toward the hill in the sheltering timber of which was the old ruin.

There were two white men in advance, and their faces were sufficiently alike to show that they stood in the relationship of brothers.

These forms were the perfection of manly symmetry, their shoulders broad and massive, and movements quick, yet graceful.

Both were bronzed-faced, handsome men, with intelligence, daring and resolution stamped upon every feature.

Their hair was black and worn long, falling almost to their waists.

They were dressed in complete buckskin suits, the fringed leggings being stuck in handsome cavalry boots, and the hunting-coats being embroidered artistically with beads and porcupine quills.

Upon their heads were broad-brimmed sombreros, worked in silver and each wore a gold star in front.

Their horses were fine animals, the saddles and bridles being of the Mexican pattern, and their arms were of the best and silver-mounted.

At each saddle-horse hung a lariat, and at the back of each rider was hung a repeating rifle.

Behind these two remarkable-looking men rode two others.

One was an Indian, tall, powerful in build, and in the full buckskin and feather costume of a Comanche Indian chief.

By his side rode a negro as black as the ace of spades.

He too wore a buckskin suit, but had much the gorgeous make-up of the Indian.

Both were well mounted and armed, and had in addition to their firearms, bows and arrows, and the Comanche carried a long lance.

Behind them trotted a horse, evidently used as a pack-animal.

Upon the Texan border these men were known as the Buckskin Pards, but the whites were men famous in frontier history as Night Hawk George and Broncho Bill Powell.

The names of their companions were Red Wolf and Scraps.

The two former were Government scouts and Texan rancheros, and the two latter their faithful allies and inseparable companions, while the four were the terror of raiding red-skins and pale-face outlaws.

CHAPTER III.

THE BUCKSKIN PARDS TAKE THE TRAIL.

WHEN the four horsemen rode into the timber on the hill, and halted at their camp, they were met by the woman, her face pale and anxious, as she asked:

"Oh, senors! where is Major Loring?"

The two scouts glanced at each other, and then Night Hawk said:

"We expected to meet him here, Senora Delporte."

"Or that he had been here and taken you with him to the fort," added Broncho Bill.

"Senors, he has not been here."

The voice was strangely calm, but the face revealed the haunting fear in her heart of ill-tidings.

"Then he has doubtless gone off after some Comanche raiders he may have come across, and will soon be here," Night Hawk remarked, in a tone of indifference.

"Yes, he will soon be here," his brother rejoined.

"Senors, you speak with an indifference which you do not feel, for you fear in your hearts harm has befallen Major Loring and his men."

"Senora, do not be alarmed, for there are only a few small bands of Comanches drifting about the prairies, and the force the major had with him was amply strong enough to beat off half a hundred."

"If he does not return by morning we will start in search of him."

"Oh, Senor Night Hawk, I thank you; but may not to-morrow be too late?"

"With night close at hand, senora, we could not find his trail," Night Hawk said.

"George, we might go back to where we should find it, and be ready to start on it at dawn."

"We can remain a couple of hours, and then get there in time for a rest of some time before daybreak."

"You are right, Will, and we will do that."

"Come, Scraps, get supper, for we have got to take the trail again in a couple of hours."

"Ah, senors, I thank you!"

"But tell me, where was it that you left Major Loring and his men?" asked Senora Delporte.

"The major left us, senora, at the Ranchero's Rest, where we halted for a couple of days."

"Ah yes, I remember, you went to San Antonio, to escort a lady to the grave of her lover, who had been the owner of Ranchero's Rest, as he called his ranch."

"Yas, missy, my poor boss, Mars' Henry Harcourt, who I came from old Alabam' wid, and who de Injuns kilt."

"Poor Mars' Henry, missy, I bury him at de ranch, and de leddy were de one he lub, and she lubbed him."

"But she marry anudder man, missy, and it near broke Mars' Henry's heart, so he resign from de army, and come to Texas ranchin', and so lost his life, while she leabe her bad husband, tarn ter singing on de stage and come down here and ask Mars' Night Hawk and Mars' Broncho to guide her out to de grave at Ranchero's Rest, and dey did it."

"But beg pardon, missy, for talkin', but I heerd yer say Ranchero's Rest, and de name bring up sorrowful memories to me and sets my tongue talkin' about poor Mars' Henry."

The negro had spoken with deep feeling, and tears came into the beautiful eyes of Celina Delporte, for the story of the actress loving one man and forced to marry another, was strange like her own.

"You need not beg pardon, my good man, for I am glad to hear you talk of your master," she said.

Then as Scraps went on with his preparations to get supper, she aske l Night Hawk:

"Senor, you carried the lady in safety to the grave of her lover?"

"Yes, senora, and she remained there a couple of days and made a sketch of the scenery about it."

"Then we returned with her to San Antonio where she again started upon her theatrical tour."

"Poor woman, and the man she married?"

"Has kept out of her sight, for she believes that he murdered her father, and she threatened him with the gallows, but he yet has dogged her steps and hired desperadoes to put her to death."

"In fact," said Broncho Bill, "he had arranged with San Cruz, your old enemy, to attack our party, and put all to death."

"And did they attack you?"

"Oh, yes, but we surprised them, and with the aid of the major and his men, sent them flying, except a few who remained," and the senora understood why they remained.

"And San Cruz, as Ramon Delporte called himself, since he has become an outlaw chief?"

"You need fear him no longer, senor."

"Ah! is he dead?"

"Yes, we captured him before we went after Mademoiselle Cleopatra, the actress, and the major had him shot an hour after he became a prisoner."

"Blessed Virgin forgive his guilty soul, for I never can," she said, in a low, earnest tone, and then, as though overcome by what she had heard, she turned and walked away.

Two hours after, just as the sun was sinking behind the prairie horizon, the Buckskin Pards rode away from the ruin, and their duty was to find the missing major and his men, and in their hearts they felt a dread that harm had befallen them, for otherwise they should have been at the haunted ruin several days before.

And Senora Delporte harbored the same dread and sent after the four brave horsemen an earnest prayer for their success.

CHAPTER IV.

SOLDIERS AT BAY.

It was just before dawn when the Buckskin Pards awoke and began preparations for their hunt for Major Loring and his soldier band.

They had ridden steadily after leaving the haunted ruin, until they came to the locality where they felt sure of finding the trail of the soldiers, after Major Loring had left them at Ranchero's Rest.

If they had crossed the small river near them, then there was some good reason for them to have turned off from the direct trail, for Major Loring had been most anxious to return to the haunted ruin, and free the Senora Delporte from her lonely exile there, the scouts well knew.

A search at the ford showed that the troopers had not crossed, but there was a trail there, and one which caused Night Hawk and Broncho Bill to glance at each other with a look of alarm.

It was the trail of Comanches, and it came from the direction of the Indian country and crossed the ford.

"Many horses?" said Red Wolf quietly.

"Yes, a hundred, from the tracks," Broncho Bill rejoined.

"They crossed here and met the major before he got to the ford," said Night Hawk.

"It do look like trouble," was Scraps's observation.

"Let us push on, for, though they are in large force we may be of service yet," and Night Hawk urged his horse into the stream and was quickly followed by the others.

A short distance away on the other bank was the remains of an encampment.

A trail led to it from the direction of Ranchero's Rest, and away from it toward the hills, some thirty miles away.

"It is the major's trail," said Night Hawk.

"He evidently saw the Comanches in time to make good his retreat, and went to the hills, where he could stand them off," Broncho Bill responded.

"Yes, for see, there was no fight here about the camp and the red-skins' trail follows that of the soldiers."

"We will press rapidly on, and I hope the major has not been corralled by them," and Night Hawk urged his ho se into a gallop.

The others kept pace with him, and thus they continued, as rapidly as they dared push their horses.

Late in the afternoon they entered a piece of timberland, and they knew that beyond it was a stretch of prairie and then the hills, so they went cautiously.

Halting, they left their horses to rest, and Scraps remaining with them, to prepare a cold dinner, the Buckskin Brothers and Red Wolf went forward to reconnoiter.

Cautiously they approached the edge of the timber, and at last reached a thicket from whence they could peer out over the prairie.

They had just come to a halt when they all glanced at each other at the same moment, for, to their ears came the sound of distant firing.

"Will, that is carbine-firing," said Night Hawk.

"Yes, and it proves that the major and his men are corralled."

"We dare not cross the prairie by daylight and thus show our weakness."

"No, we must wait until night; but would it not be well for me to go on foot, and you follow after dark with the horses?"

"It is a big risk."

"I know it, but the major and his men are in great danger, for hark! they keep up a steady fire."

"Yes, George."

"All right, Will; but let us agree upon a meeting-place for to-night."

"True; do you see yonder tall tree, the one that rises above the others?"

"Yes."

"I will meet you as near there as possible, and if I find the red-skins about there, I will come back along my trail and head you off."

So it was arranged, and Broncho Bill, on foot and crouching low, left the upper end of the timber and made his way by a wide flank movement toward the distant range of hills.

Fortunately, the nature of the ground was such that he was pretty well protected, and he kept on at a steady pace until he came to a small stream which came out of the hills.

The banks were fringed with willows, yet not sufficiently thick to hide him, and so he without hesitation bundled up his leggings and stepped into the stream.

A mile or more he went on in the water, the firing gradually growing louder and louder.

At last he came to the timber at the base of the hill and here halted.

He quickly resumed his leggings and began to look about him.

There was thick woodland before him, and the firing hardly seemed more than a mile away and over in the hills.

"They've got the major corralled up in the hills, and I guess the soldiers are having a hard time of it, for they fire pretty steadily."

"I must push ahead."

He did so, and with the greatest caution, for he knew well his great danger, as he was liable to run upon the red-skins at any moment.

At last he came to a hill beyond which he felt sure the soldiers were besieged.

He counted the shots and found that they were firing about twenty times in an hour, while straggling shots from the red-skins who had firearms broke in now and then upon the steady firing of the troopers.

He dared not go to the top of the hill to look over, as the shots just beyond the ridge told him that the Indians were stationed there.

So he cast about him for some way to see and not be seen.

A tall tree grew very near him, and looking up into its top he came to the conclusion that it was the very one which he had seen from the distant motte and pointed out to George as a rendezvous for the night.

It would be a desperately hard climb, but he would undertake it.

With his rifle slung at his back he began the ascent.

It was slow, hard work, but Broncho Bill was one to overcome any obstacle which human endurance and pluck could accomplish.

At last he reached the top and safely encircled himself among the branches.

He was at first too tired to see about him.

But at last he began to take in the situation. His tree was a superb point of lookout, and looked over the hill upon the side of which it grew, into a small vale beyond.

Across this vale there rose a spur of the range, rugged, high and wooded.

It was almost to itself, and the very spot for a party to stand at bay in.

And there, at bay, were the gallant troopers of Major Loring.

CHAPTER V.

A BOLD RECONNOISANCE.

THE hill upon which the troopers had taken refuge, was about three hundred yards from Broncho Bill's position in the tree in a straight line.

It was hardly half an acre in size, and the top was most rugged and thickly timbered.

On the top, firing from their retreats, were the soldiers, and across the valley toward Broncho Bill were their foes.

These were concealed behind heavy trees, on the other slope of the hill from Broncho Bill, and hardly a hundred yards distant from him.

He counted the red-skins in sight and there were just twenty-seven.

Then at the head of the valley there were more, he could see, and beyond the hill, hiding in a divide of the prairie were fully a score of red-skins.

In front of the hill, hiding also in the rough nature of the ground, Broncho Bill discovered several squads of Comanches, and he counted nineteen.

"Judging from those I see, there are about a hundred of them, and their ponies I see over yonder on the prairie with several guards over them."

He raised his glass, which he never went without, and counted five Indians acting as guard for just ninety-three mustangs.

"Some of the red-skins have gone under, that is certain, so it would be safe to count four to one against the soldiers, who, with the major and lieutenant were just twenty-two.

"But where are the major's horses?"

He turned his glass upon the hill where were the besieged soldiers, and saw that the animals had been killed and were being made use of as a breastwork.

"That being the case, our duty is plain, for we must get some of those Indian ponies, or the troopers will be on foot should we rescue them."

It was now getting dark, and Broncho Bill descended from his tree, after taking a close survey of all about him, with the air of one who had decided just what he would do.

Having reached the ground once more, he set off at a quick pace back on the trail he had come.

There was little need then of dodging, for it was dark, and he kept on at a brisk walk until he reached the little stream up which he had waded in the afternoon.

Here he halted, and he had not long to wait before his quick ear detected the sound of horses approaching.

Soon after, he discovered three horsemen and a led animal coming along through the darkness.

"It is George!" he muttered, and as they drew nearer, he gave a low whistle and stepped out before them.

George Powell at once grasped the hand of his brother, with the manner of a man who had been most anxious about him, and he said:

"Will, I'm awful glad you are out of it safe."

"And I, George."

"You had no trouble?"

"No, for not a red-skin saw me."

"But you saw them."

"I counted five guarding ninety-three mustangs, and the band have got the soldiers completely surrounded."

"I supposed so."

"They are within two hundred yards of the troops; but the major has a good position, though he has had to make breastworks of his horses."

"That is bad."

"Yes; but I think we can mount them and dismount the red-skins."

"How?"

"Their ponies are on the prairie, feeding with a guard of five red-skins around them, so are not stalked out."

"I see."

"I think we can first flank them, and then the Red Wolf can reach one of their guards, and quickly end his career."

"Next he can go to another, and serve him the same way."

"This will leave the side of the herd toward the hills without a guard, and we can cut out about thirty of the ponies and, tying them together, charge the red-skins and ride straight for the soldiers."

"The red-skins will think it a large party of soldiers coming to the rescue, and they will run for their ponies, when a few shots into the herd from our repeating-rifles, will doubtless stampede them."

"Will, your plan is the one to follow of course, so let us get about it," said Night Hawk.

The plan was then fully explained to Red Wolf, the Comanche, who at once said he could kill the Indian guards, for he would not be suspected, if seen, and could reply in the Comanche tongue if spoken to.

Broncho Bill started off with him on foot, when they reached the edge of the timber, and left Night Hawk and Scraps to await their return.

A short flank movement, around the point of the hill brought the scout and the Comanche in sight of the herd of ponies.

They were scattered considerably, feeding over some twenty acres of space, and the guards were stretched out in line about them, keeping them from straying out over the prairies, while the side toward the hills, where the Indians had the soldiers besieged, was unguarded, it not being considered necessary.

This situation the scout and the Comanche quickly took in and then the latter prepared to act.

"Me go now kill Comanche," said Red Wolf quickly.

A moment after he strode away, going directly toward one of the mounted guards, indistinctly seen in the distance.

Broncho Bill patiently awaited the result.

He could hear the steady firing of the besieged soldiers, a little over a quarter of a mile away, and the crack of the red-skin rifles now and then.

Otherwise all was silent about him.

With his glass to his eye he watched the departing form of the chief, and saw him walk boldly up to the side of the mounted warrior nearest to him.

Then what followed he could not see; but there was no outcry, no shot, and a moment after a horseman rode further away out upon the prairie.

"The Red Wolf got his man, has mounted his horse, and is going to another one," said Broncho Bill to himself.

Then the moments seemed to grow very long to the scout, for the suspense was great.

Would the Red Wolf succeed?

Would not one of his victims be able to make an outcry, and thus ruin all?

Such were the thoughts which flitted through the mind of the scout, as he stood there awaiting the return of the Comanche.

On leaden wings the moments went by, and then Broncho Bill beheld a horseman approaching.

But was it Red Wolf, the Comanche?

CHAPTER VI.

THE CHARGE OF THE BUCKSKIN QUARTETTE.

If the approaching horseman was not the Red Wolf, he certainly was riding straight to his death, for, sheltered by a large tree, growing a little in advance of the line of timber at the base of the hill, Broncho Bill stood, an arrow fitted to a bow, and the dart aimed at the head of the red-skin.

Broncho Bill had brought the bow and arrows belonging to Scraps, who, like Red Wolf, in addition to his firearms, carried Indian weapons.

Scraps had also essayed to carry the long lance the Comanche chief was armed with, but several times the end had struck the ground, and catching him fairly, as he rode along, unprepared for such a catastrophe, it had taken him out of his saddle, so he had discarded it.

Nearer and nearer the horseman approached, and then Broncho Bill was about to lower his weapon, feeling assured that it was the Red Wolf, when he saw that the one coming toward him wore not the chief's feather head-dress.

So he let him ride almost upon him, and then saw that the red-skin was not the Red Wolf.

Had he slain the Red Wolf?

Was he going to give the alarm to his companions?

With these thoughts, Broncho Bill let fly his arrow.

The Indian was not ten steps away, and the aim of the scout was true.

The arrow buried itself in the head of the Indian, and he had not fallen from his saddle before Broncho Bill had sprung forward and grasped his pony.

The Indian never knew what killed him, but fell to the ground without a moan.

Hardly had the scout secured the pony, and led him into the shelter of the timber, when he saw another horseman approaching.

"It is Red Wolf," muttered Broncho Bill, as the red-skin rider came nearer.

And so it proved to be, for the scout stepped out to meet him.

"Ah, white brother kill Comanche brave?" and Red Wolf glanced at the limp form of the dead Indian.

"Yes, he came riding along and I shot him."

"Him pass Red Wolf, talk little, then go this way."

"He supposed you were one of his companions?"

"Yes."

"The Red Wolf killed a Comanche brave also?"

"Kill two."

"And the others?"

"Only three brave on pony watch to-night."

"Ah!"

"Yes; white brother kill one, Red Wolf kill two—no more."

"We are in luck, so let us gather some of the ponies and get back to join George and Scraps."

They then rode toward the grazing herd, and a couple of dozen animals were quickly secured and tied together with the stake-ropes about their necks.

Then they mounted and each leading a number, moved slowly out over the prairie.

The herd slowly followed, and both Broncho Bill and Red Wolf in vain tried to check them, for they feared, as the scout had seen five guards by day, and they had found but three by night, the other two might be lying on the prairie asleep, and, seeing the herd departing would give the alarm.

But they did not appear, and the two daring men led the herd of a hundred ponies around to the spot where Night Hawk and Scraps were waiting.

Broncho Bill quickly explained the situation, and it was decided to tie all the animals together in a mass.

This was accordingly done, in lines of twelve, and with the twelve behind securely fastened to the tails of the animals in front.

Then the scouts mounted and rode slowly toward the ridge, Broncho Bill from his knowledge of the situation, anxious to strike in the rear of the largest body of red-skins.

The firing was still continued by both the soldiers and the red-skins, and the scouts felt sure of giving a surprise to the Indians which would utterly demoralize them.

They knew that a Comanche on foot was a very poor warrior, and if they could be made to believe that a large body of troopers had come to their rescue, captured their ponies, and were ready to annihilate them, they would rush for the hills with the greatest speed.

This done, the rescuing party could dash up to the little besieged garrison, let them saddle and bridle the Indian ponies and get away before the Comanches had discovered that four men had done the work.

The place for the charge was picked out, the ponies were held well in hand by Broncho Bill, and Night Hawk riding in front, the end mustang held by lariats in the hands of the scouts, while Scraps and Red Wolf rode upon either side, also holding the end of lassoes which were made fast to animals about the center of the mass.

"Give your high notes for the charge, Will," said Night Hawk in a whisper, and Broncho Bill, who could imitate all the bugle calls to perfection, placed his hands to his mouth and sounded the

"Charge!"

The notes, in splendid imitation of a bugle, rung through the timber, and instantly there came a wild cheer from the besieged soldiers.

The firing at once ceased, and cries of alarm were heard from the Comanches surrounding the hill.

With the last notes of the charge, the Buckskin Quartette went forward with a rush, the ponies keeping up with them.

The clatter of hoofs astounded the Comanches, and with wild yells they broke in flight, while the repeating rifles of the Buckskin Quartette sent the bullets flying in among the timber.

The soldiers on the hill cheered and opened a hot fire upon their foes, where they supposed

them to be, flying for their lives; and the Indians, with cries of rage, as some had dashed toward the prairie and made known the loss of their ponies, rushed with all speed to the shelter of the hills.

Without stopping to see how fast or how far the Comanches were running, the Buckskin Quartette drew rein at the bottom of the hill, and Night Hawk called out:

"Major Loring, come at once, sir, and bring your saddles and bridles, for we know that you have killed your horses."

A moment more and Major Loring ran down to the foot of the hill.

"Night Hawk's voice, as I live!"

"Yes, major; but hasten your men, for we have no time to lose."

"And the cavalry?"

"The Buckskin Quartette are all, sir, but we have here the herd of Indian ponies."

"Bravo, my noble pards! but I certainly heard a bugle."

"It was Will, sir.

"Sound the charge again, Will, for it will hurry those red-skins."

Broncho Bill, who was on the other side of the now restive ponies, gave the notes of the charge once more, and the major said with enthusiasm:

"Perfect! But we are almost starved, Powell."

"Plenty of time to eat, sir, after we get away from here."

"I have four dead men, and three wounded."

"Strap the dead on the ponies, sir, and the wounded can be mounted before comrades who will thus hold them on. But we must be off, major."

Major Loring had already given orders for his men to come down the hill and bring their saddles and bridles.

The Buckskin Quartette had still to remain mounted, to hold the excited ponies in check, and the troopers hastily untied the rear line of mustangs and saddled them.

The next line was then saddled and bridled, and the dead were strapped upon the backs of four mustangs, and the three wounded men were held on horses by the arms of comrades mounted behind them.

All the time shots from the red-skins were patterning about them, for the Indians had massed together when they saw that they were not pursued, and were halted upon the ridge.

"Now a volley all around, right into the midst of yonder timber, and then we will be off," cried Night Hawk.

The soldiers' carbines and the repeating rifles of the Buckskin Quartette rattled forth lively music, and evidently did some damage, from the wild yells that followed, though fired at random.

Then the party wheeled the captured herd and with the soldiers surrounding it, dashed away at a gallop down the valley toward the prairie, the troopers cheering lustily at their escape.

CHAPTER VII.

THE COWBOY PIRATES AT HOME.

The outlaw band known as Cowboy Pirates of the Rio Grande, were the curse of the Texas frontier.

Their leader had been a Mexican, Ramon Delporte, who had taken the name of Captain San Cruz.

He had been reared a gentleman, but the maiden he loved had discovered his wicked life, and, forced by her parents to marry Ramon Delporte's father, a wealthy old Mexican ranchero, it had made a fiend out of the young man.

He had taken his father's life, as the first act toward getting his fortune, hoping to force Celina Delporte, the beautiful young widow, to marry him.

Failing in this he had placed her in a lunatic asylum, hoping to drive her mad, and to suicide, when he would be the lawful heir.

She had escaped from the madhouse, and in fear of her life had fled to the old ruin across the Rio Grande, to hide from him.

Then he had turned outlaw and sought to find her, but in vain.

With his band of red-handed Mexicans, and a few outlawed Texan cowboys, he was wont to raid the settlements, rob trains, both Government and emigrant and run off cattle and horses from the ranches.

He was dreaded by all honest men, on both sides of the river, and there had been a price offered for his head by the citizens of Texas.

This man the Buckskin Brothers had run to earth, as has been told, with the aid of Major Loring from Fort Dreadnaught.

The major had promptly had the wretch executed, and his band had received a severe blow in their attack afterward upon the soldier-guarded train of the Buckskin Brothers, who were escorting the actress, Mademoiselle Cleopatra, to the grave of her lover at Ranchero's Rest.

Returning to the fort, by way of the Haunted Ruin, to get Senora Delporte and Perez, the major and his men had been driven to shelter on the hill, by a large band of Indians, as has been seen.

In the mean time the spy of San Cruz, Tiger Tom and his comrade, the wicked husband of Mademoiselle Cleopatra, had been forced to fly for their lives, and had crossed the Rio Grande to join the band of outlaws.

The offer of Kent, as Keene Kendall, the adventurer, called himself, of one thousand pesos to let him be the chief of the Cowboy Pirates, Tiger Tom had accepted, and the two rode toward the stronghold.

Tiger Tom had long been the spy of San Cruz, and it was seldom that he visited the stronghold.

He knew but few of the men, and it was with some misgivings that he rode on his way, for he feared that the band would not take kindly to a chief who sought to usurp the place.

Still he was determined to take big chances to get that thousand dollars, and he knew that he had to ally himself with the outlaws for protection from the Buckskin Brothers, who seemed to have set themselves to work to wipe out the Cowboy Pirates.

The stronghold was situated in the Mexican mountains, and was certainly hard of access.

But Tiger Tom knew the way well, and toward the close of the afternoon rode up to the man on sentinel duty at one of the two passes leading to and from the retreat.

"I are Tiger Tom, and I guesses yer has heerd o' him," the desperado said to the guard.

"Yes, I knows who yer is, in course; but ther cap'n hain't here."

"I knows that better nor you does, pard; but I wants ter go in all ther same."

"Who is ver pard?"

"A friend o' mine who hes come ter jine ther band."

"He looks awful high-toned."

"He's a high-flyer, you kin bet, and comes well recommended, and ef thar is any votin' ter be did, you chip in fer him."

"Yes, my friend, and keep this as a reminder," and Kent placed a twenty-dollar bill in the hand of the sentinel.

"Waal, yer does come in style, I jist reckon, so ride on to ther den, pard," said the delighted outlaw guard.

They rode on slowly, and soon came in sight of the stronghold.

It was situated under the base of a precipitous mountain, through which a chasm led to the summit, and thence on to the valleys beyond, and the approach could be readily defended by a few men against many.

A wild mountain torrent raged around the cliff, and after running off for a couple of hundred yards, again turned and ran back to the base of the mountain, thus forming a plateau several acres in size, which could only be gotten to over a rude bridge, or by the chasm-like pass over the mountain.

The rude huts of the outlaws were under the shadow of the cliff, and there was a rock corral in which stock could be driven.

No man or beast could swim across the torrent, which dashed along like lightning, its bed broken by rocks, and so the outlaws had made a drawbridge, which could be lowered from between two large trees.

It was down as the two men rode up, and readily bore the weight of their horses and themselves.

Seated in front of the largest cabin were about a dozen men, engaged in excited conversation.

The sound of hoof-falls upon the bridge caused them to glance toward the two horsemen, and they arose hastily.

"It's Tiger Tom, is one," said an outlaw.

"And t'other?"

"Are ther man as were with him at the Secret Canyon, when they told us whar ter find them Buckskin Pards," another said.

"And we found 'em?"

"Waal, now, we did; but what on 'arth brings Tiger Tom here, and a-fetchin' along ther stranger with him?"

No one could answer this question, and so they waited until the two horsemen rode up.

Both saluted the crowd, who nodded in silence, and the two men made no move to dismount.

"Waal, pards, I hev come ter see ye, and I wishes ter interdooce my friend, Mister Kent, and a gent from way back."

The men again nodded, but no one spoke, and Tiger Tom continued:

"It were rather rough, pards, fer yer ter git it so hard when ye'r tackled them Buckskin Brothers; but they is sly as foxes, and jist fixed up that leetle game, I reckons."

"It was a big loss, and the cap'n will be most hot about it," said Tomas, a Mexican, speaking with considerable accent.

Tomas was the next officer after Juan, and a villainous-looking fellow he looked.

"Pards, Senor Juan is wiped out, and some seven or eight o' ther band, and Mister Kent and me can't stay no longer in town, so we has comed out ter jine yer; but I has had news for yer."

All were now deeply interested, and a dozen voices called out for this news.

"Ther hevin' soldiers with that train, for yer jump onto, wasn't all that ther Buckskin Pards has did."

"Well, out with it," commanded Tomas.

"I hain't larn't ter talk no faster, Pard Tomas, and so yer has ter wait fer me ter give it to yer as I kin."

"Has anything happened to ther cap'n?" one asked.

"Right yer are, for the Buckskins roped him in, and Major Loring jist had him executed only too quick."

A groan went up from the crowd.

They all had feared San Cruz, and yet they were satisfied with him as a commander, well knowing that it was no easy matter to govern a wild lot such as they were.

"And Senor Juan is dead," said one.

"And I am chief," said Tomas in an exultant tone.

"Don't git ahead too fast, pards, for I has su'thin' ter say."

All eyes were again upon Tiger Tom, who very deliberately went on to tell his story as follows:

"Ther cap'n got ther idee that ther ghost o' ther old Mission were a leddy he wanted ter ketch, and so he were ter start ther alone.

"Waal, he comed back here ter put Senor Juan and his men on ther trail, and then he went back ter Texas, were nabbed by ther Buckskin Brothers, yanked out o' life by ther major, and are buried over yonder among ther hills across ther river."

"And I am your chief," almost yelled Tomas, turning to the crowd.

"Hold on a bit, Pard Tomas, for ther cap'n left a few orders which I holds here, and yer see here are his ring he wore ter prove his words," and Tiger Tom held up the ring, while Kent calmly surveyed the faces before him.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE FIGHT FOR MASTERY.

At the sight of the ring, the men pressed toward Tiger Tom, but he warned them off, while he said:

"Not so fast, pards, but let my friend here, read ther letter, for he are more eddicated than I be."

"How did you get a letter from a dead man?" rudely asked Tomas.

"I got it whar it were left for me."

"Senors, this does not look square," Tomas cried.

"You jest keep still until you hears what ther letter says."

"But how did yer git it, Tiger Tom?"

Several voices asked the question in chorus.

"Ther cap'n axed Major Loring ter let him write it, as yer will hear, ef yer listens to ther readin'."

"Come, Pard Kent, read it out."

"Let me read it," said Tomas, who was becoming greatly excited.

"I'll let him read it as I axes, Tomas, for it are my letter."

"Let the stranger read it," came the cry, and Kent, in his calm, deep voice, read the letter written by the outlaw chief a few minutes before his death.

It told of his capture, and how Major Loring allowed him to write the letter, and promised to place it in the rock where Tiger Tom was wont to get communications from him, and where letters between the two were left.

It stated that Tiger Tom was to be the chief in his place, and the ring inclosed gave proof of his wish that it should be so.

Having read it, Kent quietly handed the letter to the nearest man to pass around the crowd for inspection.

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Several knew the captain's writing, and pronounced it genuine, and all knew the ring.

"But is he dead?" cried Tomas.

"He are, for we dug up his grave and seen the body."

"Well, you are but one of the men, and I am officer, so I disregard a dead man's orders and say I am chief," and Tomas gazed upon the crowd in a manner that showed he meant to back up his words.

He was a dangerous man, and the outlaws knew him as a quick and dead shot, while he also was an ugly hand with a knife.

Though small in stature he was very strong and active, and it was said that Captain San Cruz had been the only man who had ever cowed him.

The eyes of all now turned upon Tiger Tom, to see if he had the pluck to face Tomas in the right to take the place as chief.

Tiger Tom was very quiet, and after a moment said:

"As Pard Tomas seems ter 'spect me ter shout, I has ter say that ef I wanted ter be cap'n, I'd git thar, or let him tarn my toes up."

"But it hain't a posh I keers much about, and so I has sold out."

"Sold out?"

"Yas, Pard Tomas?"

"What did you sell?"

"Ther posh o' cap'in."

"You did not own it to sell."

"Oh yas, for I considers ther cap'n gave it ter me."

"And who did you sell to?" and Tomas's face was livid.

"To my pard here."

A murmur of amazement went up from the crowd at this, and the Mexican officer laughed rudely, while he said:

"That man is a fool to buy from you what you could not deliver, and I care not for the purchase, for I am chief here, now that Captain San Cruz is dead."

All eyes now turned upon the stranger, who returned quietly:

"I am no fool, Señor Mexican, as you will discover, for, having bought Tiger Tom's claim to be chief of this band, I shall pay him now for the purchase, and if you want the berth you have got to fight for it."

The words pleased the crowd.

They were rather pleased with the stranger's appearance, and as he boldly threw down the challenge to fight to Thomas, it was very plain to see that he had grit.

As for Tomas he gazed with the look of a frenzied beast upon the bold stranger, while he hissed forth:

"You'll fight for it, eh?"

"So I said."

"Then get your gun ready."

"One moment, please, for I demand a square, fair fight, either with rifles, revolvers or knives, whichever you prefer, so let your friend that you may select arrange for you, and Tiger Tom will act for me, as soon as I have paid him for the prize that we are to fight for."

There was no excitement in the tone of the man, and his face was as passive as if nothing of moment was upon his hands to settle.

The men all gave their sanction at once to this arrangement, and Tomas saw that he would not be upheld if he shot the stranger, after the challenge had been given, and so he said:

"I agree; but who are you, anyhow, that dares come here as a stranger and wish to make yourself chief?"

"I come here because I dare not return to Texas, for I would be hanged, I think."

"I desire to join your band, and I prefer to be chief."

"As for my name you can call me Captain Ku-Klux."

The crowd seemed pleased with the man, and Tiger Tom called out:

"He's squar', pards, and I says may the best man win, and I sells out to Cap'n Ku-Klux."

"Here, Tiger Tom, take your pay."

As he spoke the stranger drew a roll of banknotes from his pocket and counted out a thousand dollars to Tiger Tom, while the men cheered, as one of them shouted:

"He's no tramp, pards, for he pays up like a man and has got plenty dust left, you bet."

"Come, let us settle this matter," said Tomas, who saw that the stranger was winning the men over to him.

"I am at your service, señor."

"Tiger Tom, please arrange for me, and I will be satisfied."

"I'll do it," said Tiger Tom, who was more than pleased with the strange pard he had car-

ried with him to the camp of the Cowboy Pirates.

"I'll do it, pard; and you bet our side wins this leetle game," and he stepped up to the man whom Tomas had selected to act for him, and to whom the Mexican was whispering in an earnest tone.

CHAPTER IX.

THE REVOLVER DUEL.

"WAAL, pard, what's yer leetle game?" asked Tiger Tom, as he stepped up to Tomas and the man whom he had selected for his second, and who, like himself, was a Mexican.

"I say revolvers," said Tomas.

"Agreed, for my pard don't keer what ther wepons is, I guesses," replied Tiger Tom.

"And the fight to be on horseback," continued Tomas.

"Agreed."

"To stand sixty yards apart, start at the word to go, and empty revolvers as we advance."

"Agreed."

"Well, I am ready."

"I guesses Cap'n Ku-Klux am also," and Tiger Tom walked over to where the stranger stood, talking with some of the men and seemingly wholly unconcerned at what was taking place between his second and Tomas.

"Pard Ku-Klux, he says as how revolvers is ther guns."

"All right."

"And he wants ter fight on horseback."

"I don't care—afoot or horseback is all the same to me."

"Startin' at ther word ter go, from yer places sixty yards apart."

"Very well."

"Waal, yer is a cool one," said Tiger Tom, with admiration at the man's coolness.

"I am ready, Tiger Tom, though I should like a fresh horse."

A number of the men at once offered their own horses, and accepting one led forward, the stranger soon transferred his saddle and bridle to him.

Then he drew one of his revolvers and emptied it rapidly, after which he carefully loaded it for the fray.

Tomas, in the mean time, also reloaded his revolver, while his second went to the corral for his horse.

The ground was stepped off by Tiger Tom, and the two men mounted and rode to their positions.

The face of the Mexican was livid with rage and hatred.

He was determined to kill, for he had long wanted to be chief of the band.

Just as the position was open to him, by the death of San Cruz and Juan, he found another to bar his way, and that other a stranger.

Each man was to sit quietly until the word to start, and then only was he to draw his weapon and fire as he pleased.

The crowd of outlaws were delighted at the prospect of seeing the affair, and, from the bearing of the stranger, he had won their admiration and sympathy.

Tiger Tom won the word, and when all was in readiness he gave the order:

"Go!"

As the word left the lips of Tiger Tom the Mexican outlaw and the stranger spurred forward, at the same moment drawing their revolvers.

The Cowboy Pirates stood with breathless interest gazing upon the duel for mastery.

They saw that the stranger, quick as Tomas was, had first drawn his weapon, and his shot rung out a second in advance of the Mexican's.

The Mexican's shot followed instantly, but it was discharged as his horse was going down with him, with a bullet in his head.

The horse dropped and Tomas got a heavy fall; but he fired a second time as he was on the ground, rising to his feet.

The bullet cut through the rim of the American's sombrero, knocking it from his head; but, at the same instant, he also fired his second shot and the right arm of the Mexican fell to his side, shattered at the elbow, the revolver falling from his hand.

In an instant he had seized it in his left hand, however, and fired.

The bullet buried itself in the brain of the stranger's horse and he too went down with terrific force.

But, nimble as a cat, Kent caught on his feet and then his third shot rung out.

The Mexican staggered back, as though hit, while his bullet cut a gash in the shoulder of the American.

The two men were now but a few paces apart, and while Tomas kept his ground, Kent was advancing upon him.

Ere the Mexican could again fire, Kent did so, and Tomas fell dead, the bullet having cut through his heart.

"Three cheers for Cap'n Ku-Klux!" yelled Tiger Tom, wild with delight at the result of the duel.

Instantly the outlaws made the rocks echo with their yells, for a dangerous man was out of their way, and their new chief had won their hearts by his pluck and deadly aim.

"Men, I thank you; and, having both purchased and won the captaincy of your band, I hope none of you will be foolhardy enough to again dispute my right to it."

"If so, let him do so now, while I feel in a killing mood."

As he spoke, he seemed to look upon the face of each man in the crowd; but not one accepted the challenge flung into his teeth by Captain Ku-Klux, as the new chief was to be known, and under which name he was to become even more dreaded upon the Texan border than San Cruz had.

CHAPTER X.

THE RETURN.

NOT until the Buckskin Pards were dashing away over the prairie, with the soldiers whom they had rescued, did the astounded Comanches realize that instead of a large number of troopers only a very few had come to the relief of the little party; in fact, not a large enough force to remain and fight them.

The Comanches heard the heavy tramp of the retreating hoofs, and they knew that their foes had escaped them, their ponies had been captured, and they had to mourn the loss of several braves, while others were wounded.

Then wild and revengeful were their cries, and as the party dashed away over the prairies, they heard the yells of the discomfited red-skins and laughed.

Night Hawk and Broncho Bill would have been in humor to remain, with the advantage of having the red-skins on foot, and fight them.

But they saw that even the plucky major was suffering terribly.

He and his men had been forced to eat the flesh of their horses, which they had killed the first day to serve as a breastwork.

Water they had none, and it was death to attempt to get any.

Day and night the little party had been fighting against big odds, with only horseflesh for food, no water and unable to get rest.

They were getting desperate when the Buckskin Pards had arrived and rescued them.

Knowing this, both Night Hawk and Broncho Bill made all haste to a motte, some miles distant from the hills, and there they came to a halt.

There was good water there, for a stream bordered the timber, and their own provisions were quickly divided among the starving soldiers, who ate and drank ravenously.

After a rest of an hour, Night Hawk thought it best to go on, as in the darkness they knew not what the Comanches were about, and he feared that they might attempt the recapture of their ponies.

"Once we get a score of miles away, we can camp for a good rest, major, for they will not dare leave the hills that far, and I guess will start for their village when daylight comes," Night Hawk said.

So the party mounted and pressed on once more, the wounded men standing the pain of traveling bravely.

It was nearly dawn when Night Hawk said:

"Major, yonder is a good resting-place, where you see that dark shadow, for it is the ford where you turned off at sight of the Indians."

"And glad am I to get back to it, Powell," was the reply.

Then Major Loring added, earnestly:

"And but for you, Night Hawk—you, your brave brother and comrades—we would never have seen another sunset, for the Indians intended to charge us to-night, I am sure, from their movements."

"I know we are more than glad to have been of service, major, and the Senora Delporte is the one who started us after you."

"God bless that woman, Night Hawk."

"I owe it to you, and Broncho too that she again comes across my path."

"I loved her in the bygone, and, not knowing why she married old Delporte, I believed her fickle and false."

"Now I know all and I found her through you."

"I have known years of sorrow, and there was the grave of a lost love in my heart."

"She too has had deepest sorrows and been made to suffer; but when we return to the fort the chaplain shall unite us in marriage and our happiness will be complete."

"I wish you both the joy that you deserve, Major Loring."

"But there is our camping-place, and we will rest until noon, and then we can press on and reach the old ruin to-night, while I will send Scraps and Red Wolf on ahead now, that the senora may not longer suffer suspense."

"Ever thoughtful, my dear Powell," was the reply of the major.

As they were to halt for quite a rest the Indian ponies were released from their being tied up in a solid mass and staked out upon the prairie and the two scouts built a fire and cooked breakfast, for Broncho Bill had shot a fine deer.

The soldiers were still weak, the scouts noticed, but tried to appear strong; but after breakfast they all sunk down to rest.

Night Hawk and Broncho Bill then stood watch, while Scraps and Red Wolf had pressed on to the Haunted Ruin.

While watching the scouts cut down some saplings and made *travois* for the wounded soldiers, who were great sufferers while riding.

They also had dinner ready, and the Indian ponies massed together again before they awoke the worn-out troopers.

"You are worth your weight in gold, Night Hawk, you and Broncho Bill, and this little band will never forget you," the major said, when he awoke, greatly refreshed by his long nap, and saw what the Buckskin Brothers had done for them.

The wounded soldiers were then placed upon the *travois*, which were hitched to Indian ponies, and the party again set off.

As they had plenty of ponies to change to the *travois*, they pushed rapidly on and it was just dark when they reached the Haunted Ruin.

Scraps had a splendid supper for all hands, for both he and Red Wolf had killed several kinds of game as they went along, and the air was filled with the luscious flavor of boiled buffalo steaks, birds and roast turkey, with bacon and coffee in addition.

Anxious to get back to the fort, after his long absence, the major started the next morning, and he felt happy in having as his companion, the beautiful young widow, who had so long been the ghost of the Haunted Ruin.

The Buckskin Pards would not desert the party, until they had seen them safely within the stockade walls of Fort Dreadnaught, and then, with their herd of Indian ponies, which the major insisted they should take every one of, they started home; but they forced upon the major and Senora Delporte the acceptance of two of the best animals for their use.

"Come back in one month, Night Hawk, you and Broncho Bill, for I shall be married then, so don't fail me," the major had said at parting with the scouts.

"Isn't me and Red Wolf invited too, Mars' Major?" asked Scraps, with a broad grin.

"Why, Scraps, when I invite one of the Buckskin Pards, as the men call you gallant four, I mean it for all."

"It would not be a wedding without you and the chief," was the reply.

Then the Buckskin Pards rode away upon their trail to their ranch, distant a day's ride, and where Night Hawk and Broncho Bill knew that their loving mother anxiously awaited their return, and that they would make her heart glad in telling her what they had done on the Rio Grande border, to put down outlawry, as well as to make two lives happy in being again united after years of separation.

CHAPTER XI.

MADEMOISELLE CLEOPATRA.

THE scene changes from the Texan prairies to the marts of civilization.

In an Eastern town a theater is crowded listening to the superb singing of a beautiful woman.

As Mademoiselle Cleopatra she is known, and yet there are many in that crowded theater who have known her under a different name.

Then she was lovely Clio Castleton, the daughter of a supposed millionaire.

Courted by many, admired by all, they remembered how she had quietly slighted young men of honor and wealth who had sought her hand, and became the wife of a stranger, one whom no one seemed to know.

He was a fascinating man, handsome, and he appeared to have plenty of money.

More no one seemed to know, not even the lovely girl who became his wife.

Soon after their marriage the old merchant died.

Heart-disease the physicians said it was, and no questions were asked.

Then came the crash. Merchant Castleton was found not to be worth a dollar.

He had forced his daughter to marry Keene Kendall to save her from poverty, as he believed.

But Keene Kendall at once left the town with his young bride, and soon after it was rumored that they had separated.

It then became known in some way, that Clio Castleton had loved another, in fact was engaged to a young cavalry officer then stationed in Nebraska.

She had given him up, Henry Harcourt was his name, to obey her father's commands, and become the wife of Keene Kendall.

Then Clio Kendall dropped almost out of the memory of her old friends.

But to the town came, several years after, a singer who had won fame in other places for her loveliness of face and form, her splendid acting and her superb voice.

"Mademoiselle Cleopatra," was the name upon the bills, and yet, when she who bore that name faced the audience, with white face and burning eyes, many recognized in her Clio Castleton.

She had dared to come back to her old home and appear before the footlights.

She asked no favors, but boldly met them all face to face, and she commanded their admiration and esteem at once.

When she felt her triumph, her face flushed and she held the whole audience spellbound.

Crowded as was the theater, there was one box that held a single occupant.

It was a man of fine appearance, dressed elegantly, and from first to last he kept his eyes upon the beautiful singer.

He seemed enraptured, and she could not but observe his devoted attention.

She never had seen him before, that she could recall, and it was with some curiosity that she glanced at the card attached to an exquisite basket of flowers which she had seen an usher take from the box and bring to her.

On the card was written.

"KENNARD KEMP."

"How strange that the name should be so like his," she said in a low tone as she read the card, and the memory of her cruel husband, Keene Kendall, flashed before her.

But she kept the flowers, and declining to see a number of old acquaintances, who sent their cards to her hotel, accompanied by her pretty French maid, Lizette.

The name of Kennard Kemp had revived that of Keene Kendall, which brought back to her haunting memories, and she soon sought her couch to drown thought in slumber.

The next morning, after breakfast a card was brought to her room.

This one read:

KENNARD KEMP,
Attorney at Law,
New York.

"Why has he called?" she muttered.

"And he sends his professional card too, so I suppose I must see him."

A few moments after Kennard Kemp entered the parlor of Mademoiselle Cleopatra's suit of rooms, and bowing low, as he saw Lizette present, asked:

"May I see you alone, madam, as I call upon a most important matter?"

Clio motioned to Lizette and the two were alone together.

CHAPTER XII.

THE ATTORNEY'S SECRET.

WHEN Lizette had retired from the room, the visitor asked in a quiet way:

"You are she that was Miss Clio Castleton, are you not, madam?"

"I have no reason, sir, for denying it, now that I have made a success in the profession I have chosen," was the cold reply.

"And you are Mrs. Keene Kendall?"

"I am, sir."

"May I ask if you know where your husband now is?"

"Let me first, sir, request to know the cause of this deep interest in me?"

"To serve you."

"I really require no aid, sir."

"You do not know how deep a service I can render you, madam."

"Have you come to tell me of the death of my husband, sir?" she asked quickly.

"I am sorry that I do not bring you such glad tidings."

"Is he in jail?"

"I regret to say that he is not, madam."

"Then, pray tell me the nature of your business with me?"

"As I said, to serve you, madam."

"I thank you, sir; but in what way?"

"Be frank with me, madam, for I come to tell you good news, and I only ask that you will answer my questions."

"I am an attorney, and I have information of value to you, and which, for a consideration, I am willing to give you."

"Ah! it is wholly a business matter then?" and Clio spoke in a vein of sarcasm.

"Yes, madam, wholly so."

"Well, sir, what would you know?"

"Can you tell me where your husband is?"

"On the Texan border."

"What doing?"

"Hiding from justice among a band of cut-throats known as Cowboy Pirates of the Rio Grande."

"Ah! he has turned outlaw then?"

"Yes, he preferred it to—but never mind what."

"Have you seen him of late?"

"Yes, or rather it was several months ago."

"He attempted your life then?"

"You seem well informed, sir."

"I am."

"Yes, he twice attempted my life."

"I am glad that he was unsuccessful."

"Thank you, so am I."

"May I ask how you know that he has turned outlaw?"

"I have a letter in my possession which tells me that, having found his attempt upon my life unsuccessful, as he had planned to kill me, which you seem to be aware of, he had been forced to fly to the border and ally himself to the Cowboy Pirates, of which he is now the chief, known as Captain Ku-Klux, I believe."

"Can I tell you more, Mr. Kemp?"

"You have given me information which I desired proof of, madam, so I will now make known to you that which will be of great service to you, but I will have to ask you to kindly answer several more questions."

"Well, sir?"

"Your father was a millionaire, I believe?"

"He was so supposed to be, sir, but he was found to be penniless upon his death."

"He left you nothing, then?"

"Not a dollar, sir."

"Your father believed your husband rich, I believe?"

"He did."

"And a gentleman?"

"He had the appearance of a gentleman."

"He had some money, too?"

"Yes."

"Do you know where he got it, madam?"

"I do not, sir!"

"He was a counterfeiter."

"Ah! I am not surprised at anything you say of him."

"He was from the West, and was known as Keene, the Counterfeiter King."

"But his den was raided by the detectives, and all of his dies and instruments seized, with the entire gang of counterfeiters except himself."

"He killed a man and escaped, and having a large sum of money with him at the time, shaved off his beard, cut off his long hair, and, as a pretended gentleman began to enjoy life in New York."

"One day he saved your father and yourself from being killed by a runaway team, and thus it was won your favor."

"He married you for your money, and then poisoned your father by slow degrees to get it; but finding him not worth a dollar, after his death, he treated you so cruelly that you left him."

"You know my sad story, sir, as you seem to know his guilty life."

"I do, madam, and, as I said, I have come to serve you."

"I am listening, sir."

"What motive had your husband, think you, for attempting your life?"

"He was aware that I knew his guilt, that he was the slayer of my poor father."

"And why did you not betray him?"

"I cared not to have his life upon my soul."

CHAPTER XI.

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Captain Ku-Klux.

"I knew that my testimony would send him to the gallows."

"My father was dead, I wished not publicity, and so I allowed him to go."

"In return he twice attempted my life, when I made an expedition upon the Texas frontier."

"He had a motive, madam."

"To prevent my betraying him?"

"No, another."

"Ah! and what was it, sir?"

"To get your fortune."

"I have no fortune."

"You are mistaken, for your father did leave something, after all."

"Indeed! You surprise me."

"Your father had a very dear friend years ago, and one who got into financial troubles, as he speculated with money left to his care, and lost it."

"Your father gave him the amount to pay back the sum, and thus save his honor, and he took only a scrap of paper, an I. O. U. in return."

"The man went to the gambling-table, hoping to win more, and instead lost nearly all which your father had given him."

"Then, with prison staring him in the face, and afraid to meet your good father, he fled, and no one knew where he went."

"I remember his unfortunate story, sir, though it was years ago."

"Now, madam, it is in my power to place you in possession of a large fortune, but I must ask in return one-third of the amount you receive through me."

"And without your aid I cannot get what is my due?"

"You cannot."

"I accept your terms, sir," was the terse response of the beautiful woman.

CHAPTER XIII.

A STRANGE STORY.

"Now, sir, who are you, and what is the fortune I am to get?" coolly asked Clio, after she had accepted the terms of the attorney.

"You will kindly give me a written pledge to transfer to me one-third of the wealth you gain through me, madam?"

She turned to a table and quickly wrote the document, asking:

"How shall I sign it?"

"Sign it Mrs. Keene Kendall, nee Clio Castleton, and then add:

"MADEMOISELLE CLEOPATRA,

"Actress."

She did as he directed, and he folded up the paper and put it carefully away in an inside pocket.

"Now, sir?" she again asked.

"You pledge yourself not to betray my part in this transaction?"

"I do, sir."

"Well, madam, to begin with, I am a black sheep, for though a lawyer by profession, I was debarred from practicing on account of certain irregularities I was guilty of, and I went to New York and hung out my shingle, and the result was, I have had a good many cases of an evil kind to attend to, though I never dared attempt to practice in open court."

"One day a man came to my office, and needed my services."

"It was your husband, Keene Kendall, and he found that I would help him in his plot."

"It seems that he had gotten hold of a letter addressed to your father, and opened it."

"It was from the old banker whom your father had befriended, and was written from New Mexico."

"This letter stated that he had fled to save himself from prison, had drifted about for years, and then had invested his remaining money in a mine in New Mexico."

"It had panned out beyond his wildest hopes, and he had drawn up papers of ownership, making your father half proprietor with himself."

"He also stated that, as he had no near kindred, and was a bachelor, he made you his heiress, and would draw up his will when he found time to look up an attorney."

"I took the letter, saw that it was genuine, and I agreed to draw up your will, leaving all to your husband in case you died."

"This will was to be placed in the hands of a reputable lawyer by a veiled lady pretending to be yourself, and with the request that he hold it in case aught happened to you."

"I was to then go to New Mexico, look up the old miner, myself disguised as such, and incidentally let him know that I was a lawyer."

"In this way I was to get a chance to write his will, leaving you all, and find out all about his fortune, which he stated was more than a million."

"In the mean time your husband was to go on your track, and, watching a favorable chance, was to kill you."

"Then it was to be known that you were dead, the lawyer holding your will would open it, your husband would be advertised for and appear, pretending to have been teaching school somewhere, and then out would come the information that the old miner had been killed in his cabin one night, and had left you all."

"Do you see, madam?"

"I see the most diabolical plot of infamy that was ever concocted," was the reply of Clio, who had listened throughout without a word of interruption.

"I admit it."

"And that poor old miner?"

"I went to New Mexico to find that he had disappeared."

"Ah! you killed him?"

"On my honor, no."

"Your honor?"

"Well, I admit it is not worth swearing by, madam; but the miner had gone away, and had said that he would not return for several months."

"I therefore came back to find that your husband had failed in his attempts upon your life, and had been forced to fly."

"I saw at once that he could get nothing through your death, as he was outlawed, and I had advanced him large sums to carry out his purpose and wished to get back my money."

"I supposed that the old miner had come to seek you; but dogging you for awhile, I found out that he had not."

"So I made up my mind to come to you, confess all, and make terms with you, after which I would look up this miner for you, as, being under an assumed name, you could never find him without my aid."

"Now you know the truth, madam."

For some moments Clio made no reply.

Her brain was in a whirl of thought.

But she was outwardly calm.

At last she said:

"Mr. Kemp, I signed a contract to give you one-third of any fortune I might gain through you."

"I did not expect to get any; but I will keep that contract on one condition."

"Name it, madam."

"That you make no effort to find that old miner, but leave it for me to do."

"But you do not know his name, or his mine?"

"It matters not, leave it to me."

"And you will keep your contract with me?"

"I will, sir."

"I will do as you wish; but I cannot see how you can find the man, for it would be a wonderful piece of detective skill to do so, and you but a woman."

"Women sometimes make excellent detectives, sir."

"But I wish to try and if I fail, then it will be time to ask you to aid me."

"Write your address on your card, Mr. Kemp, and then I shall be happy to say good-day to you."

He did so, and was glad to escape from her penetrating eyes and haughty manner, for he almost feared her, when he had thought that he would cause her to stand in holy awe of him.

But the woman was not of a nature to fear, and she had gone through enough to know her own power.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SCOUTS' LETTER

SEATED upon the little piazza of their prairie home, one afternoon, some months after the rescue of Major Loring and his men from the Comanches, Night Hawk and Bill Powell were watching the approach of a horseman.

He was a long way off and coming across the prairie upon the trail that led to their ranch.

A handsome woman, with a face full of strength and goodness, was seated near the two scouts, rocking to and fro in an easy-chair, as her fingers deftly worked upon a piece of sewing.

It was the mother of the two handsome young scouts* and she was justly proud of her three noble sons, for she had a third, Frank, then a

* Mrs. Powell, the mother of the Powell brothers, was with them on many of their prairie and mountain expeditions. She died some years ago and is buried upon the old ranch.

THE AUTHOR.

surgeon in the United States Army and stationed upon the northern border.

"Perhaps it is Scraps, or Red Wolf returning from town," suggested Mrs. Powell, referring to the horseman.

"No, mother, it is neither, for it is a soldier," assured Night Hawk.

The mother sighed, and replied:

"Ah me! that means some order to call you again away from me, I fear."

"Well, mother, we have been idle quite a while now, and the Indians are beginning to give the settlers trouble again of late, not to speak of that red-handed outlaw, Captain Ku-Klux, who needs a lesson after his raids upon Texans," Broncho Bill remarked.

"Where duty calls you, and George, will I never say aught against your obeying," was the reply.

All now watched the horseman closely, and soon after he rode up to the ranch and threw himself from his horse.

He was a scout-courier from Fort Dreadnaught, and well known to the Buckskin Brothers.

"Well, Dudley, we are glad to see you; but I hope there is nothing wrong," said Night Hawk.

"No, Night Hawk, only a letter that came for you and Broncho, and as it is marked 'very important,' the major asked me to deliver it to you at once, so here it is!"

The letter was addressed to both of the brothers, and Night Hawk quickly opened it, for he recognized the writing, while a cowboy took the soldier's horse and Mrs. Powell led the visitor into the house to serve him with refreshments.

"Well, George, read it aloud," said Broncho, as his brother told him who it was from.

Sitting down by the side of Broncho, Night Hawk read as follows:

"BOSTON, MASS., June 1st, 18—

"MY DEAR PARDS IN BUCKSKIN":—

"I write you from my old home, and to make known to you a most remarkable story, while I feel assured will interest you, and the mystery attending which I beg you to solve for me."

"I received a call this morning from a man whom I saw in a box at the theater last night, and who sent me a basket of flowers with his name attached."

"That name, and the man I am pledged not to betray; but I wish to make known to you his story."

"It is that my husband sought him out, nearly a year ago, and got him to agree with him to perform a most diabolical piece of villainy."

"A letter had been sent to poor dead father, and fell into the hands of my husband."

"That letter was from an old man whom my father had befriended. He had to fly to save himself from prison, and my father gave him the money. He went to New Mexico and invested his money in mining, and after nearly ten years wrote to tell my father that he had made a fortune, had given him half partnership with him, and as he had no near kindred was determined that I should be his heir."

"The plot between these two villains, my visitor and my husband, was that the former should visit the old miner and get from him all his secret and have him draw up legal papers with my name as heiress; than the man was to put him out of the way."

"In the mean time a bogus will of mine was to be deposited with a reputable lawyer, and it made my husband my heir and executor."

"My husband's work was to dog my steps, get rid of me in some way, then the lawyer would advertise for the heir."

"Of course my husband would turn up and all would be well."

"The man who visited me did his work as far as going to New Mexico; but there he found out that the old miner had gone away, no one knew where, having left several months before; so he returned to find that my husband's attempts upon my life had failed, and, having become an outlaw he could not claim my property, if I did die."

"So the man came to make terms with me."

"I agreed to his terms, but I dared not let him go again in search of the old miner, fearing he would kill him, and so I told him I would find my inheritance."

"So you see I come to you, knowing your value as friends and detectives."

"All the clew I can give you is that the man has been eight years in the mines; he is about sixty years of age, and his birthday is the Fourth of July, as I remember well, for he was a very intimate friend of my father and often visited us."

"He has a scar in the shape of a cross in the very center of his forehead, caused by falling against an iron fence when a young man, and his middle left finger is gone, it having been bitten by a dog and afterward amputated."

"His hair was black, his eyes blue and his height six feet. He is under an assumed name, which I do not know, so I can only give you the above facts."

"His fortune is over a million and the name of his partner, my father, was Roger Castleton."

"With what I have told you, I beg you to set to work to find the miner; tell him that my father is dead; expose the plot of the villains; say that I am

making money and do not need his, which he must give to charity.

"This will thwart the villain, who, by my contract, is to have one-third of all money I receive through him."

"All expenses you incur I gladly pay, and I send within a draft upon a Galveston bank for fifteen hundred dollars."

"I beg you to do this for me and command me for any price you deem adequate for your services."

"Address me as before."

"Your attached friend,

"CLIO."

"P. S.—I have hunted up an old photograph of the miner and send it within."

"Perhaps you might get some information from my husband, Captain Ku-Klux, through a third party whom he did not know; but I leave the detective work in your hands, feeling assured you can trail the mystery to the end."

CHAPTER XV.

THE BORDER DETECTIVES.

"WELL, Will, what do you say?" asked Night Hawk, when he had finished reading the letter.

"I say that the work will be one of interest and pleasure, and all expenses we incur she can pay; but for our services not a dollar."

"So say I!"

"Then we begin work at once?"

"Yes, we will start as soon as Scraps and Red Wolf return with supplies from town."

"I am ready, so where shall be our first start?"

"Our best plan would be to get from Captain Ku-Klux all that he knows, for he was the one who read the letter and started the man whom Cleopatra refers to upon the miner's track."

"Well, we will see if we can reach Captain Ku-Klux in some way," was the reply.

The next evening the Buckskin Brothers, accompanied by Scraps and Red Wolf, rode away from the ranch.

They carried with them two pack-animals and bade their mother farewell for an indefinite time, but telling her that the duty they were going on was not one of extra hazard.

Night Hawk had written an answer to Clio, and sent it back by the courier, the next morning, to go with the mail from the fort, and he told her in it that his father and himself, with Scraps and Red Wolf, would at once set off to trail the mystery.

The destination of the Buckskin Pards was to the vicinity of the stronghold of the robber chief of the Rio, Captain Ku-Klux.

Since he had become chief of the Cowboy Pirates, Captain Ku-Klux had certainly proven himself an able commander.

He had fortified his camp, added to the number of his men, and was wont to sell his booty and stock as soon as possible, so that, if the outlaws were compelled to hastily retreat, they would not have to lose that which they had risked life to obtain and dyed their hands in human blood in the getting.

The raids of the robbers of the Rio Grande were more systematic than when under the command of San Cruz, and they generally struck a settlement or train at a moment when they were least expected.

That Captain Ku-Klux had his spies, who kept him informed of any and every opportunity to make a raid that would pay well, the Buckskin Brothers well knew, and it was to capture one of these secret agents that they went to a point as near the stronghold as they dared.

The spot selected was in a wild canyon, on the tops of which was some timber. In the canyon grass grew in great quantities, so the horses would fare well, and there was plenty of water.

Game was in abundance, and Red Wolf could bring down with his bow and arrow all that was needed; hence there was no fear of starvation.

The hiding-place was between two fords, and from the trees on the hilltop a lookout could command a view of any one crossing the river.

Taking up their camp in the canyon, they divided the day into four watches so that each one of them would be on duty for a certain number of hours.

At night two of them would go to one ford and two to another and camp, so that no one could cross the river and they not know it.

They had been two days at their camp in the canyon, when one afternoon late, Broncho Bill, who was on watch, gave the signal to those below that some one was crossing the river.

"Which way, Will?" asked Night Hawk.

"Coming from the Texas side."

"How many?"

"One."

"Can you see who he is?"

"He is in Indian rig, but I believe is a white man, from his actions."

"Then he is carrying news, so watch him." Broncho Bill did watch him, and saw that he took a trail on the Mexican shore which would lead him to the stronghold of Captain Ku-Klux.

It was now too dark to see at a distance, and descending from his point of lookout, Broncho Bill joined the others at supper, and then all rode away for their night camp at the ford.

"He'll be back in the morning, Will," said Night Hawk.

And so it proved, for just after dawn the same horseman was seen coming toward the ford.

"Take his trail, Will, and keep it while I go after Scraps and Red Wolf, and when we see the course he takes, I guess we can surround him."

With this Night Hawk rode away, and soon after the horseman passed within a few hundred yards of where Broncho Bill was in hiding.

The scout watched him until he was out of sight, and then slowly followed upon his trail, while he said to himself:

"That is the same fellow who crossed yesterday to the Mexican side, and I am convinced that he is no Indian."

After following his trail some little distance, Broncho Bill continued:

"He is going straight toward the Comanche country, sure; but if he is a red-skin I am fooled. Ah, here come George and the others. Now we will see what we can do to catch that red bird in a trap."

A moment after Night Hawk rode up, followed by Red Wolf and Scraps, leading the pack-horses.

"Anything new, Will?"

"His trail leads straight for the Comanche country, as you see, George."

"Yes; but how far is he ahead?"

"Just out of sight."

"Then we will have a chance to catch him at the Willow Motte, by making a flank movement and riding rapidly."

"Yes, so you shove off with Red Wolf and I'll stick on his trail, in case he does change, and Scraps will follow me with the pack-horses."

Night Hawk and Red Wolf at once rode away to the right at a gallop, and Broncho Bill continued on the trail of the man he had been following, Scraps keeping a good distance behind him, but within signal, should he be needed.

CHAPTER XVI.

UNDER FALSE COLORS.

THE horseman who was being shadowed, and led into a trap, jogged along across the prairies like a person who was not looking for danger.

At noon he halted for an hour's rest, and after a dinner mounted and went on his way once more.

That was directly toward the Indian country. He had ridden for a couple of hours after his halt, when a clump of timber appeared ahead.

He was at a point of the prairie that was rolling, and he could not see very far upon either side or ahead, on that account.

He did not seem to care to go through this timber, and was drawing his horse to one side, to go around it, when, suddenly, he beheld a horseman appear over a rise in the prairie directly in his path.

Instantly he drew rein and brought his rifle, which was slung at his back, around for use.

But just then, upon the other side of him, appeared another horseman.

This one was an Indian.

He turned from one to the other, and, being headed off in two directions, seemed not inclined to try and fight his way through, so wheeled his horse as though to take the back trail.

Instantly a third horseman confronted him—a negro!

Then he seemed to have considerable dread of meeting foes, and urged his horse toward the point which was yet open to him; but quickly pulled his horse back upon his haunches; a horseman barred his way in that direction also.

It was Broncho Bill.

With Night Hawk and Red Wolf heading him off, and Broncho Bill and Scraps shutting off his retreat, he was in a trap decidedly.

He seemed to realize this, and hesitated.

Toward him, from the four points of the compass, now advanced the Buckskin Pards.

They each one held their rifle ready to fire, and were distant from the lone horseman but a couple of hundred yards.

The man knew not what to do, but had made up his mind to make a bold dash for freedom, when startlingly distinct and threatening rung out in Night Hawk's clear tenor voice:

"Hands up! or we fire!"

Instantly the horseman threw his hands up over his head, and Broncho Bill said, triumphantly:

"I knew he was no Indian, for see how quickly he understood English."

From their positions surrounding the assumed Comanche, the Buckskin Pards now advanced, their rifles ready for use.

As they drew near, they saw that the horseman certainly appeared to be a Comanche, for his dress and make-up was perfect.

He was well mounted, too, carried a lance and bow and arrows, and also a rifle hung at his saddle-bow, while there was a suspicion of a belt of arms under his hunting-shirt, which hung loosely about him.

He sat his horse well, his hands up above his head and his eyes uneasily wandering from one to the other of the four men advancing toward him.

At last they halted a few paces from him, and dismounting, Broncho Bill, without a word, disarmed him, not forgetting to take the belt of revolvers and knife under his hunting-shirt.

"Now, hands down," ordered Night Hawk.

"Who are you?" he added, as the man lowered his hands.

"Me Injun."

"You are no more Indian than is Scraps here. Who are you?"

And Night Hawk spoke in a tone that showed he would stand no trifling.

"Me Injun."

"Will, I guess we will have to take this fellow somewhere to wash him off, for I have an idea that we will then recognize him."

"All right, George," was the ready reply.

"I am not an Injun," came from the man's lips at this threat.

"Who are you?"

"I am a ranchman, and I rigged up like this to go among the Comanches and find out if they intended raidin' ther settlements soon."

"Do you speak Comanche?"

"I does."

Night Hawk at once addressed him in that language, asking:

"Where is your ranch?"

"Over in the Pecos country," was the ready reply in the same tongue.

"George."

"Will."

"I know this fellow."

"Who is he?"

"Do you remember one of the gang that were going to hang Scraps and Red Wolf, pretending that they had murdered young Harcourt of Ranchero's Rest?"

"Yes."

"One of them was a man named Maze, and he spoke Comanche well, and I heard that he had gone to live among the Indians when he found that we suspected him of being one of the Cowboy Pirates."

"I remember him now, Will, and I guess he's the agent of Captain Ku-Klux among the Comanches."

The man listened to this conversation uneasily.

He had recognized the Buckskin Pards, and the red paint on his skin alone prevented the pallor of his face being seen.

"Are you Maze, the Cowboy?" asked Night Hawk.

"I might as well own up."

"What are you doing under false colors?"

"Pards, I was afeerd ter travel as a Cowboy, so I jist rigged up as a Comanche."

"Either are in danger on these prairies, if you are a Comanche or Cowboy Pirate."

"Pards, I hain't nuther; but I wanted ter go from my ranch ter see some friends down toward San Antone, and so I put on this rig."

"And you saw them?"

"Yas."

"Where did you just come from?"

"From the ranch o' my brother, near San Antone."

"Nowhere else?"

"No, pard."

"What made you cross the Rio?"

"I hain't crossed it," and the man started.

"We followed your trail from there."

"It wasn't my trail."

"It was."

"I guess we better take him to the fort, George, and turn him over to Major Loring."

"All right, Will."

"Lordy! don't do that, pards, for ther major don't give no suspected men trial."

"Indeed?"

"Yas, he had Cap'n San Cruz shot without trial."

"Ah! how did you know that?"

The man was silent. Like many a man in a bad scrape, he had said too much.

"My man, you are Cowboy Maze, or Maze, the Cowboy, as they call you. You lived on the Dresser Ranch, and when suspected of being secretly a member of the Cowboy Pirate band, you decamped.

"Captain San Cruz needed an interpreter in the Comanche village, for he and the red-skins were not at war, and he sent you.

"Now that another man is the chief of the outlaws, this Captain Ku-Klux, you are serving him also. You came from the Indian country, went to the outlaw stronghold yesterday, returned this morning, and are now on your way back to the Comanche village."

The man was now silent, and Broncho Bill said:

"He is just the man that Major Loring wants to make another example of."

"Oh, pards, don't take me thar, fer I'll be kilt."

"It is just what you deserve for your crimes.

"You are a white renegade, living among Indians, who war against your people.

"Scraps, bind him."

"Pards, I knows a heap, and if yer'll let me off, I are willin' ter talk, for I thinks more o' Maze, ther Cowboy, than I does o' anybody else," and the man's manner indicated that he had something to tell which the scouts wished to know.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE COWBOY'S SECRET.

WITH their prisoner secured, the Buckskin Pards went on over the prairie until they came to a good camping place.

It was upon a timber-clad prairie-rise whence a good view of the surrounding country could be seen.

Their horses were staked out, and found fine feeding, a good spring was in the timber, and having shot a deer, they prepared for a feast and rest.

The man was freed of his bonds, but told not to move from a position near the camp-fire, and Scraps went to work to cook dinner.

Red Wolf busied himself fixing up the various rigs belonging to the party, and the Buckskin Brothers sat down on a log near and called to the prisoner to come to them.

"Now Maze, the Cowboy, you intimated that you had something to tell?" said Night Hawk.

"I kin talk, pard, ef thar is anything ter be gained by it."

"Now there is just this.

"We are convinced that are one of the band of Captain Ku-Klux.

"Your life is sweet to you, vile as you are as a murdering renegade; but one man does not make much difference, where we can make a blow tell against the whole outlaw band, so we are willing to be merciful."

"And you won't kill me?"

"That depends upon yourself."

"What is I got ter do?"

"You have got to answer questions as we ask them."

"I'll do it."

"And you must understand that my brother and myself are very well posted, so if we catch you lying we will break our part of the contract."

"I won't lie to yer."

"If you give us square answers, we pledge you, that through your service to us, you can go, and we will see you in safety across the Rio Grande.

"If you deceive us, and refuse to aid us, then straight to Major Loring you go.

"Take your choice."

"It is taken."

"Well?"

"I'll squeal."

"You are wise, for your life is dearer to you than the lives of your wicked comrades."

"You bet."

"Who are you?"

"You guessed it."

"A Cowboy Pirate?"

"Cap'n Ku-Klux calls us now Robbers o' the Rio Grande."

"A rose by any other name, eh, Will?"

"Yes, but I'd put it, George, in this case."

"A skunk by any other name would smell as bad."

"They are a vile lot: Cowboy Pirates, or Robbers of the Rio Grande."

The prisoner watched this little by-play anxiously.

"You went to the stronghold of Captain Ku-Klux yesterday?"

"Waal, yas."

"You did?"

"I did."

"You came down from the Indian country?"

"I did."

"You live in the Comanche village."

"I does."

"You act as a go-between."

"How's that?"

"You are interpreter, agent and all for Captain Ku-Klux?"

"I is."

"Why did you go to the stronghold of the Rio Grande Robbers?"

"To see Cap'n Ku-Klux."

"What for?"

"Has I got ter tell?"

"Yes."

"Waal, yer has promised."

"What?"

"Ter let me go."

"Yes."

"I wanted ter tell him that Chief Red Heart intended to make a raid upon the upper settlements, and ask Cap'n Ku-Klux to strike below, so that one settlement c'n't help t'other."

"I see," and Night Hawk showed no sign of surprise, nor did Broncho Bill at this infamous confession of the renegade.

"And when was this raid to be made?"

"In about ten days."

"And what said Cap'n Ku-Klux?"

"He didn't say nothin'."

"Why not?"

"He wasn't thar."

"Ah! he was away from his stronghold?"

"He were."

"With his band?"

"Only two of 'em."

"Where was the rest of the band?"

"In the camp."

"Where had Captain Ku-Klux gone?"

"Up inter New Mexico."

In spite of themselves the two scouts started at this information.

"What had he gone there for?" quietly asked Broncho Bill.

"Ter see some pard, ther boys said."

"When did he go?"

"Yesterday morning."

"I see; and he carried but two men with him?"

"Yes."

"Who were they?"

"Ther boys said they was Tiger Tom and Breezy."

"Two notorious ruffians."

"Waal, yas."

"Did you learn just where he was going?"

"They said to the gold mines in the neighborhood o' Nugget City; leastwise he said that were ther place for 'em to look for him, if they needed him."

"How long was he to be gone?"

"Some weeks, maybe a month, they said."

"So you could not get the outlaws to strike the settlements at the same time that Red Heart did?"

"No, pard."

"The officer in charge would not do so?"

"No, they had orders not ter leave camp until ther cap'n got back."

"And without Captain Ku-Klux to aid him, will Chief Red Heart make his raid?"

"You bet he won't."

"Did he expect you to come right back?"

"He gave no time, and thought maybe I'd be gone some days."

"Do you know who we are?"

"You two is Night Hawk and Broncho Bill Powell, the Buckskin Brothers, but they calls ther four o' you ther Buckskin Pards."

"I am glad that you know us, for you will understand that we are not men to trifl with."

"Now I shall leave you in the hands of the Comanche and our negro pard, to take you to Major Loring."

"Oh Lord!"

"Have no fear, for you shall bear a letter from me to him, telling him that you are our especial prisoner, and we have promised you our protection."

"I then wish you to come back with your guards and others whom the major will send, and we are to meet you, ten days from this, right here in this timber."

"Why does yer send me to ther fort?"

"Because my brother and myself are going upon a little trip, and you are to be the prisoner of Red Wolf and Scraps, and they must go to the fort on an errand."

"Let one o' em go, and leave t'other to guard me."

"No, for you are too slippery a customer."

"You go to the fort, and you return here and await our coming."

"I will write the letter now to Major Loring."

"Can I read it?"

"Yes, for I wish you to see that we intend to act squarely with you, and your life shall be the instant forfeit if you do not act squarely with us," was the stern response of Night Hawk.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SECRET EXPEDITION.

"HERE is the letter, Maze the Renegade, for that is the name you claim," and Night Hawk Powell handed the letter he had just written with a pencil to the prisoner.

"Read it yourself."

"Why do you not read it, to see that it is all right?"

"Cause I can't read."

"Ah!"

"You read it."

Then Night Hawk read as follows:

"CAMP ON PRAIRIES,

Thursday.

"MAJOR WILLIS LORING,

"Com'dg Fort Dreadnaught:

"SIR—I send this letter to you by a man known as Maze the Cowboy.

"He is the *special* prisoner of the Buckskin Pards, and we are under a pledge to him that we do not wish broken, so kindly protect him and oblige."

"That's squar' music," interrupted the prisoner.

Resuming, Night Hawk read:

"The prisoner will tell you what the intentions of Chief Red Heart are, and it would be well to be prepared at the fort and in the settlements, though we do not think the Comanches wi'l move yet awhile."

"As we go on a secret expedition, we wish Scraps and Red Wolf to return to us with the prisoner, meeting us at the place where this letter is written ten days from to-day.

"We also would beg of you twenty men, *without* uniform, and without even a *non-commissioned* officer, for a special duty, having them come with Scraps and Red Wolf.

"What this duty is we cannot now make known to you.

"We have the honor to be, sir,

"Your obedient servants,

"NIGHT HAWK and BRONCHO BILL,

"Buckskin Scouts."

The latter part of this letter Night Hawk did not read, considering it best not to do so.

But the prisoner seemed satisfied.

Then dinner-time was called by Scraps, and the five sat down to a camp feast, during which it was explained to Red Wolf and Scraps what they were to do, Broncho Bill adding:

"If he makes any effort to escape you, shoot him, and don't forget to watch him while at the fort; but treat him well and don't tie him up when you can help it."

"You is certainly squar', pards," said the prisoner at this.

Soon after dinner the Buckskin Brothers took from the pack-animals what they would need for their trip, and then saw Red Wolf, Scraps and the prisoner start on their way to the fort, the latter bound in his saddle so as to prevent any "funny business," as Broncho Bill expressed it.

Red Wolf took the lead as guide, the prisoner came next, and Scraps brought up the rear, leading the pack-horses.

As they disappeared over a rise of the prairie, Night Hawk said:

"Well, Will, though we have not spoken together upon the subject, I saw that your ideas were mine."

"That we should go to New Mexico?"

"Yes."

"Sure."

"I think we have done enough to track Captain Ku-Klux and his pards."

"I am sure of it."

"He has gone there to look up the rich old miner."

"Certain."

"Yes, we can beat the devil around the stump in that way, surely; but let us be off," Broncho Bill added.

A few moments after the Buckskin Brothers mounted and started upon their trail into New Mexico, fortune seeming to have greatly favored them by sending Captain Ku Klux on ahead, without doubt his intention being to find the old miner that they sought to discover on the clews given them by Clio.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE OLD MINER.

A LIGHT streamed from the half-open door of a substantial log cabin in the mining country of New Mexico.

It was not an uncomfortable home, and yet all about it was crude in the extreme.

A table, a shelf of books, several chairs of home make, a few bearskins spread upon the floor, a cot and some cooking utensils comprised all that was in the room.

There was a swinging-lamp over the table, and a man was seated beneath it, engaged in figuring, as several sheets of paper were covered with figures.

The man was fully three-score, though his form was erect and powerful.

His attire was that of a miner, top-boots, corduroy pants and a blue shirt, and his sombrero did not hide his long gray hair.

His beard was gray also and worn long.

"Well, I'm glad I made the rounds of my different mines and investments, for it shows me that I am a very rich man."

"Yes, I have control of considerably over a million dollars, or what will bring it at least."

"And my share will be about six hundred thousand."

"Ten years ago I fled from Boston to escape being put in prison."

"Well, I deserved to be punished, for I had no right to use the money in speculation, intrusted to my care."

"I did use it though, and I lost every dollar of it, beggaring seven different people who had trusted me."

"Let me see, it was twenty thousand dollars all told, and twelve years interest at ten per cent, per year, which I will allow, will be twenty-four thousand, four more than the original amount."

"This will be forty-four thousand which I shall pay back to those I defrauded, or their heirs."

"Then how badly I treated poor Castleton, who gave me right out the money to pay those losses."

"I gambled it away and fled."

"Well, his money gave me a start, and he has been my conscience partner ever since, and I now will be able to give him over half a million, while his daughter, pretty little Clio, now grown to womanhood, shall be my heiress, for I have no one to leave it to."

"How strange that Castleton has not answered my two letters."

"Does he look upon me as such a thief as to ignore me, even where there is half a million at stake for him, and as much more for his daughter, when I die?"

"I should have heard from him."

"But I dare not go East."

"No, I tremble at sight of every strange face even in these times, fearing that they are officers of the law in search of me."

"I will, when I have heard from Castleton, and gotten him to settle up for me those debts with interest, go East then in honor."

"I will be glad to see dear old Boston again, for I am getting old now, and need more comforts than I can get in these wilds."

"I do not understand about my letters remaining unanswered, though."

"I will write again, and I will take the letter to the camp post-office in the upper mines, and register it, so that he will be sure to get it."

"Yes, I will write at once, making full confession once more of my wrong, and my fears of arrest, and tell him that their money and his money, with ten per cent, interest, is at his order with his share as half-owner in all my fortune."

"Yes, I will write at once."

He arose, as he spoke, to get paper and envelope and beheld a man standing in the doorway.

It was a wild country, there in these mining camps, and there were desperate men about, and the old man dropped his hand quickly upon the revolver in his belt, as he beheld the stranger upon the threshold of his cabin.

CHAPTER XX.

A WOLF IN SHEEP'S CLOTHING.

"Hold on, my friend, for I mean you no

harm," cried the visitor to the lonely cabin, as he saw the act of the old miner was hostile.

"You should not come on a man in these parts, sir, without warning."

"But you don't belong hereabout, I see," and the miner seemed very nervous.

"It was because I was a stranger in your country, sir, that I did not know better."

"But I was seeking Miner Matt, and was directed at the camps, some miles away, to come here."

"I am Miner Matt," and the old man seemed to shrink, for the dread was upon him that the stranger was an officer of the law.

"I am glad to meet you, sir."

"My name is Keene Kendall."

"How d'ye lo, Mr. Kendall?" and the miner did not seem happy.

"I should introduce myself better, perhaps, by saying that I come from Mr. Castleton, your old friend."

"My dear sir, I am more than glad to see you," and the miner wrung the hand of his visitor most warmly, after which he bade him be seated, and drawing up a chair near, said:

"Now tell me all about my dear old friend."

The visitor was dressed in a traveling suit, with slouch hat and top boots, an attire that was not just the thing there.

He wore a sack coat, buttoned up, so that if he carried a belt of arms beneath it they were not visible.

"Well, sir, I should tell you that when your first letter arrived for Mr. Castleton, he was quite sick, and receiving your second he begged me to at once come out to see you, for he is suffering with the gout, and is unable to write."

"Poor fellow! he should lead the life I have the past fourteen years, and he'd never know what gout was."

"Why, I am over sixty, and never have an ache, while I can work down many of the young men in the camps."

"You look hearty, sir; but perhaps I should tell you that I am Mr. Castleton's son-in-law."

"What! you married little Clio—for she was his only child?"

"Yes, sir; Clio is now Mrs. Keene Kendall."

"You were not from Boston?"

"No, sir; I was from Chicago, but went East on business, was so fortunate as to stop Mr. Castleton's runaway team one day, when they were in New York, and thus met them."

"Dear little Clio! She must be a beautiful woman now."

"She is indeed, sir, very beautiful."

"And you are to be congratulated, indeed, for she is rich and will be richer."

"I am not a poor man myself, sir."

"I am glad to know that, for it shows that you were not seeking Clio's fortune."

"Ah, no! I matched her father dollar for dollar when I was married to his daughter."

"Good! And how has Castleton prospered?"

"He has done well indeed, sir; but here is his letter to you, which Clio wrote for him, as he could not hold a pen."

The old miner seized it, broke the seal, and read aloud:

MY DEAR OLD FRIEND:—

"How more than glad was I to hear from you, and my noble son-in-law, Mr. Keene Kendall, whom this will introduce to you, will explain why your first remained unanswered."

"I congratulate you upon your success."

"It is wonderful, and no man deserves it more."

"I note what you say about my being your equal partner and Clio being your heiress; but, my dear friend, don't so bind yourself."

"The amount that you owe others, the sum you owe me, with interest, which you say you will pay, you can give to my son-in-law."

"Make it payable in a draft to him, as I cannot sign my name, or give him gold-notes, as you deem best."

"This is all that I will claim of your hard-earned fortune, though of course I shall not refuse to share with you if you demand it, after we have had a talk over matters."

"As to your coming East, put that off until I have squared up your debts and gotten all trouble against you squelched."

"Then I will write for you to come."

"But do not come before, for the law has a good memory, you know, and I wish you to appear with flying colors and make your enemies hide their heads for the abuse they heaped upon you."

"When you do come, our house is your home, and you will find little Clio a wife now, for great changes have taken place in the years since you departed for the West."

"Now, my old friend, I close, with the assurance that my son-in-law will act for me in all things that you may wish to trust and consult him in."

"With best wishes, many thanks, and the hope that you will, before very long, be in our midst, I am, as ever,

Your devoted friend,

"ROGER CASTLETON."

Tears stood in the eyes of the old miner as he finished the letter, and he said in a low tone:

"God bless him! God bless you for coming to me with this letter."

"But I must fix you up a bed here, for—"

"No, my dear sir, for I took up quarters at the shanty they call a hotel in the mining-camps, and I have there a couple of guides, whom I engaged to bring me here, so I will return tonight, as I am anxious to be off again."

"I was in hopes that we would have several days together, Mr. Kendall, for I long to talk over old times; but I will not detain you, as I can understand how dull it is here for you, and you wish to get back."

"I have money deposited in a Chicago bank, and I will give you a draft on it for the amount I wish to send Mrs. Castleton, and also for another thing which I wish to ask you to do for me."

"With pleasure, sir."

The old miner took from a hiding-place in the cabin a check-book, and he quickly wrote out two checks, making them payable to Keene Kendall, saying as he did so:

"This check please indorse, and hand, please, to Castleton; it is for forty-four thousand, as you see, and the other check here is for twenty-five thousand, and I beg you to purchase with it, as you pass through New York, a necklace, ear-rings and bracelets of the finest diamonds you can get, and present them to little Clio for me."

"Oh, sir! you are really too kind," said the infamous hypocrite, who had received from a wicked pal in Boston, the second letter which the miner had written to Roger Castleton, and had thus decided upon the bold plot which he had carried out, of getting a small fortune from the old man.

"It is her due, Mr. Kendall, and more, sir, while remember to tell her that she is to be my heiress, and I am worth over half a million, I frankly tell you, and Roger, her father, is my partner for as much more, notwithstanding he seems not to wish it."

"I have just returned from a trip through the mining country, and I tell you that I am rich, and I hope soon to be again in my old home, passing my latter days in peace, luxury and happiness."

"I sincerely hope that you may, sir, and now I will bid you good-by, hoping to meet you before long, and, in fact, when Mr. Castleton has arranged those matters for you, which he referred to in his letter, I will come after you, myself."

The old miner wrung the hand of the wolf in sheep's clothing, as Keene Kendall certainly was, and stepping to the door opened it for his visitor.

As he did so, two men suddenly confronted them, a pair of revolvers were shoved into the face of the robber, and Night Hawk Powell's stern voice said:

"Captain Ku-Klux, you are our prisoner."

CHAPTER XXI.

KIDNAPPED.

A LOOK of absolute horror swept over the face of Captain Ku-Klux, at the words of Night Hawk Powell.

He had in his pocket drafts for nearly seventy thousand dollars.

He had plotted well, and carried out his plot in magnificent style.

The letters of the old miner, his forged letter to that personage, his knowledge of all the circumstances, had caused him to appear well with the old man.

Not a shadow of doubt was in the miners mind.

With his two best men, Tiger Tom and Breezy, Captain Ku-Klux had gone up into New Mexico, and, knowing where to find the old miner had readily done so.

When his confere in guilt, Kennard Kemp, the wicked attorney, had sought the miner, the latter was away upon a visit to his various investments.

But with his usual luck in deviltry, Captain Ku-Klux had found him at home.

With a fortune in his pocket, he was about to return to the camps, join his two men, and go back to his stronghold.

In a few months he would again visit the old miner, with some concocted story to get as much more, if not a larger sum from him, and having, in the mean time secured all of the results of his murderous raids, so that he could carry the sum therefrom in his pocket, he would desert the Robbers of the Rio Grande, take a vessel for a foreign land and there enjoy his fortune, giving up his revenge upon Clio, for fear luck might in the end fail him and he be found out.

Such was the well-laid scheme of Captain Ku-Klux, and well he had performed it thus far.

Imagine then his horror and terror at being confronted by two men whom he knew but two well, the Buckskin Brothers.

He was armed, but his weapons were beneath his sack coat, which was buttoned up.

Then too, a grip of iron was upon each hand, for the scouts had grasped his wrists with one hand, while they leveled their revolvers in his face with the other.

It was a woeful moment for Keene Kendall.

It was a happy moment for Night Hawk and Broncho Bill Powell.

It was a moment of amazement for the old miner.

The outlaw could not speak.

He simply glared, while his teeth seemed to chatter.

But the old miner, true to his supposed friend, broke the spell:

"What does this outrage mean?" he cried.

"It is no outrage, sir, and we are Government officers, so do not interfere," Night Hawk replied sternly.

"And what have Government officers to do with my friend, here?

"There is some mistake."

"No, sir, there is no mistake, for we were on the trail of Captain Ku-Klux, the Robber of the Rio Grande, and we have caught him."

"This man is no robber, but my friend."

"No, he is your worst foe, and he has come to you with a pack of lies."

"Hand us that lasso hanging yonder, please, and when he is secure we will tell you all, and if there is any mistake, make full reparation for it."

"That is fair," replied the miner, and he went to get the lasso.

Then Captain Ku-Klux recovered his nerve, and began a desperate resistance.

But he was overpowered by the brothers, agile and strong as he was, and then securely bound hand and foot.

Dragging him to a chair they placed him in it, and Night Hawk took a letter from his pocket and said:

"Please read that letter, sir, and see if we are on the wrong track."

It was the letter from Clio to the Buckskin Brothers.

The old miner read it in a low voice, yet distinctly.

He read it slowly as though drinking in every word, and when he had finished it, he said:

"Great Heaven! Can man be so vile?"

"This man can be, sir, and is."

"You are the man to whom the letter refers as the friend of Mr. Roger Castleton?"

"I am."

"You see what the letter says?"

"Yes, it tells me that my poor old friend is dead, and has been for years," was the sad reply.

"But this is the husband of little Clio?"

"It is the adventurer, the wretch, sir, who killed her father by slowly poisoning him, sought to have his confederate in sin kill you, thus having his unhappy wife get your fortune, and, by putting her out of the way, as he tried hard to do, with his forged will and papers, he would secure all."

"Driven into outlawry for fear of the gallows, as he expected his wife would betray his having murdere her father, and knowing that my brother and myself were upon his track, this man became chief of a band of outlaws whose stronghold is in Mexico, and is known as Captain Ku-Klux, the Robber of the Rio Grande."

"I have heard of the scamp, sir."

"Failing to get his wife's fortune, as he had hoped, he came to you to swindle you out of all that he could."

"He has two men with him, desperadoes like himself, and they await him in the camps."

"We dogged him here, fortunate in striking the trail by accident, and we arrived at his cabin just behind him, so heard all that passed between you."

"Now, sir, do you believe us or that man?"

"They lie!" yelled Captain Ku-Klux.

"They tell the truth, for they have no motive in deceiving me, and you have!" was the stern response of the old miner.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CLEVER CAPTURE.

THE old miner seemed deeply moved at what he had heard.

The faces of the two scouts told him of their honesty, and the proof of the guilt of their prisoner was undoubted.

At last he asked:

"And who are you, gentlemen?"

"We are known as Night Hawk and Broncho Bill Powell, also called the Buckskin Brothers, and are rancheros and scouts," said Broncho Bill.

"Ah! I have heard often of you, for the deeds of the Buckskin Pards are the theme of many a camp-fire talk."

"I am glad to meet you indeed, gentlemen."

"And may we ask your aid in securing the capture of the two confederates of this man?"

"Certainly, I shall be only too glad to aid you, so command me, please."

"He left his men at the Gold Brick Hotel, in Nugget City Camp, to await his return."

"Their names are Tiger Tom and Breezy; but you had better address them as Tom and Breeze."

"If you will help us to gag this fellow and hide him away, we would ask that you go to Nugget City and ask for those men."

"Tell them that the captain has decided to remain up at your cabin all night, and wishes them to come, and to bring his horse with theirs."

"You can ride his horse back, sir."

"I will do as you wish."

"When you come, show them where to put the horses, and talk rather loud, so that we can hear you as you approach the cabin."

"Open your door and ask them to walk in, and we will be here to catch them off their guard."

"It is a good plan, and I hope will come out all right," said the miner, and he at once got some old clothing with which Captain Ku-Klux was gagged so that he could utter no sound.

He was also more securely bound and placed in the corner behind the miner's cot-bed.

Then the old miner set out upon foot and walked rapidly down the mountain trail to Nugget City, which was nothing more than a number of cabins, saloons, a blacksmith shop, gunmaker, and what was called the Gold Brick Hotel.

The latter was a collection of one-story log huts, and contained a bar, "office," dining-room, kitchen and a score of bedrooms, the latter being furnished only with cots without covering, for "guests" were supposed to furnish their own bedding.

Tiger Tom and Breezy had already made acquaintances, for they were enjoying a little game of poker with two miners when the old man entered the saloon.

They seemed to have been imbibing rather freely also, for they were a little boisterous.

The old miner never frequented the saloons of Nugget City, so he asked the landlord to request his two guests to come out.

Believing that their chief wanted them, the two men promptly closed the game and went to the door.

"Sorry to disturb you, gentlemen, but the captain is up at my cabin, and asked me to come after you."

"He wishes you to square your account here and bring his horse with you, and I'll ride him back, as I am afoot."

"All right, old Methuz, we'll git at once."

"Jist lead ther way," said Tiger Tom.

"You bet when ther cap'n shouts we dance," Breezy added.

The bill was quickly paid, the horses gotten from the log stable of the Gold Brick Hotel and the three set off for the cabin up in the mountains.

The two men tried to pump the old miner, on the way, as to what business had brought their chief to the mines, but he was very non-committal, while apparently trying to give them information.

At last they arrived in the vicinity of the cabin, and as they turned off of the trail, the miner said in a loud voice:

"Here, gentlemen, put your horses here, back of my cabin, and they will be safe, I assure you."

The animals were securely fastened, unsaddled and unbridled, and then the miner led the way to the cabin.

"This is my mountain home, and you are more than welcome."

"You'll find the captain within," he said in a voice that he meant should reach the ears of the Buckskin Scouts.

Opening the door he added:

"Walk in."

They obeyed, and as they did so, each received a stunning blow in the face, and instantly, as they staggered back, a grip that could not be shaken off was upon their throats and a revolver muzzle thrust under their eyes.

The two desperadoes were half dazed by the blows, half choke'd by the grip upon their throats, and felt that they were powerless in the hands of their captors.

"Disarm them, please, sir," cried Broncho Bill, and the miner obeyed with an alacrity that belied his years.

"Now those ropes, please."

The miner seized the ropes, which lay on the table, and in a couple of moments the two desperadoes were tied beyond their power to free themselves.

They had not spoken, they had not offered much resistance. They seemed bewildered.

So sudden had been the blows, so stunning, so quickly the after results, that they had not the power of resistance.

What it meant, they did not know.

Their captain they did not see.

They were only aware that he had come to the mines to see an old friend, and there was big money in it for him.

They saw the old friend, and they recognized with terror the Buckskin Brothers.

"Now, Mr. Tiger Tom, I am even with you for the attack you wished others to make on my life," said Broncho Bill.

"And there lies your guilty leader, Captain Ku-Klux, so you see we have the three of you," and Night Hawk drew the cot away as he spoke.

A groan came from the two men.

They felt that death stared them in the face.

"Now, sir, if you will still allow us to impose upon you, we would like to get some supper, after which we will start for Texas with our prisoners, for we wish to get well out of the mining country by dawn."

"I will go after our horses, George," and Broncho Bill left the cabin.

The old miner cheerfully set about getting supper, while Night Hawk took the gag from the mouth of Captain Ku-Klux and gave him a dipper of water, for he did not wish to torture the man, vile as he was.

When he could speak Captain Ku-Klux said firmly:

"We will owe our death to you and your brother, if death it is, Night Hawk Powell."

"It will be death, you can make up your mind to that, Captain Ku-Klux, and prepare your souls accordingly," was the response.

In half an hour supper was ready, and soon after Broncho Bill rode up, mounted upon his horse and leading Night Hawk's.

"Better eat something, men, for we will not halt for hours," urged Night Hawk.

Tiger Tom and Breezy accepted the invitation, but Keene Kendall the Ku-Klux would not eat a morsel.

His heart was almost crushed, so fearful had been the shock upon him.

After a conversation apart with the old miner, for some time, the Buckskin Brothers decided that they were ready to start.

The horses of the robbers were brought to the door, and each man was made to mount and was securely bound by his feet beneath the animal he bestrode, while a lariat also held the horses together.

Night Hawk then mounted and led the way, Broncho Bill following behind the prisoners, and then started off in Indian file, the old miner standing in his door and grasping in his hand the drafts which had been taken from Captain Ku-Klux and returned to him.

"Oh! what have I not escaped!" he murmured.

"And that poor girl!

"She is fatherless they tell me; but I will now be a father to her, and at once will I send her a draft, and the names, to pay back that money which I took in the long ago."

"To-night I am a happy man," and the old miner, with the departing horsemen no longer in sight, re-entered his cabin and for a long time sat musing over what had happened in two hours' time.

CHAPTER XXIII.

FOR THE SAKE OF REVENGE.

THE sun was several hours high, when at last the Buckskin Brothers decided to halt for a much needed rest.

They had kept their horses going at a steady gait since midnight, for they had no desire to run upon a band of miners, who, ev'r willing to help a man in distress, might undertake to free the prisoners.

They fortunately met no one other than one horseman, who passed them in silence, not knowing that the men were prisoners.

"One word and I kill the man who utters it," had Night Hawk said, when the solitary horseman came in sight.

Though feeling that they were doomed, the three men yet loved life so dearly, that they did not care to hasten their departure out of it.

So they remained silent and the man passed on.

Then too in the heart of each one was a fond hope that they would be able to escape.

When at last a halt was made men and horses were much jaded.

Ever humane the Buckskin Brothers at once staked the horses out and then untied the feet of the prisoners, and bound their hands, to give them a rest.

Then they spread their blankets for them and told them to lie down while they prepared something to eat.

The prisoners were hungry and ate heartily, for their feet were again tied and their hands released so that they could feed themselves.

Then two hours of sleep was allowed, each brother standing guard half of the time and going to sleep and waking up with the precision of clockwork, so thoroughly had they trained themselves.

The horses, with water, food and rest, were ready for the march, and the party pushed on once more.

It was just sunset when they halted in a most secluded and safe retreat, and intending to remain until morning, a comfortable camp was made.

A good supper was prepared, and then the prisoners were secured for the night, the scouts taking turns in standing guard over the camp, for they seemed to possess an endurance that was phenomenal.

In the morning another start was made and they pushed on steadily all day.

Knowing that they had reached the Indian country, the scouts were most anxious, and they took no sleep but were constantly on the watch.

But at last they came near the rendezvous appointed with the party from the fort and were glad to feel that they were two days in advance of the time set to be there.

"It will give us and our horses the rest we need for our trip to Mexico," Broncho Bill said.

"Yes, and we do need it," was the reply, and the haggard faces of the brave men proved how much they needed rest.

Arriving at the rendezvous, though the same precaution was taken, to guard against the escape of the prisoners, both Night Hawk and Broncho Bill were able to get rest.

The day after their arrival the scouts called to Captain Ku-Klux to follow them apart from the other prisoners.

He did so, wondering what it meant.

"Captain Ku-Klux," said George, "you are certainly aware that we know your life pretty well."

"We can carry you East and have you hanged for the murder of Mr. Roger Castleton."

"We can have you hanged in Texas for attempting the life of your lovely wife."

"We certainly can hang you as Captain Ku-Klux, the Robber of the Rio Grande; but we will give you over to Major Loring at the fort, and it will be for him to decide your fate and that of your men."

"But there is one thing we wish you to tell us."

"What is it?"

"Who was your pal in New York?"

"Who do you mean?"

"I mean the man whom you went to when you formed your plot to get the old miner's money by killing your wife."

"I will not tell you."

"You refuse?"

"Yes."

"And why?"

"Spare my life, and I will tell you."

"It really is not of enough consequence."

"Why do you wish to know?"

"Well, he betrayed you to your wife, that he might get part of the miner's money by being the means of her getting it, and as he plotted against life we wish to end his career of evil also."

"I will not tell you."

"She feels that she should not betray the man, having given her word, and we desire to find out who he is without her doing so."

"I won't tell you."

"All right—don't. But I should think your desire for revenge would force you to do so," said Broncho Bill.

"How so?"

"Why, while you hang, he will get a snug sum from your wife and enjoy life."

"By Heaven! but you are right."

"I will tell on him, and I hope he'll hang, too, if I have to," said Captain Ku-Klux firmly.

"Who is he?"

"His name is Kennard Kemp, and he is a pretended lawyer in New York."

"You will find his office at Number —, Chambers street, just opposite the City Hall."

"Thank you," and Night Hawk wrote down the name and address given, while the outlaw chief said, gloatingly:

"I do this for the sake of revenge."

CHAPTER XXIV.

A DOUBLE SURPRISE.

A DAY ahead of their time, so as to be promptly on hand, Red Wolf and Scraps with their prisoner, arrived at the rendezvous, and they were accompanied by just twenty-four troopers.

The latter, however, wore no uniforms, nor were their horses carrying military saddles and bridles.

The mad rage of Captain Ku-Klux and his two men, when they saw Maze the Cowboy a prisoner, knew no bounds.

They fairly foamed at the mouth, for they naturally supposed that they had been betrayed by him.

As for the renegade he looked serene, for he felt that he was at least safe.

After listening to the curses heaped upon him by his comrades in crime, he called Night Hawk and Broncho Bill aside, and said:

"Pards, you has acted square with me thus far, and when yer tells me ter go, I'll prove my friendship for yer by telling you another leetle secret I has."

"I never met Cap'n Ku-Klux but once afore, and this time when I went ter visit him, ter tell him about Red Heart, I intended tellin' him what I know'd; but as he were away, I didn't."

"Now when yer tells me I kin git, just hold yer ears open fer a leetle music."

What the secret was the scouts had no means of knowing, so they patiently awaited for the renegade to make it known.

After a day's rest the whole party set forth, and their way lay back the trail which the scouts had followed the renegade on from the Rio Grande.

It was night when they arrived at their old camp, and then they rested for an hour.

There they left Captain Ku-Klux, Tiger Tom and Breezy, with Scraps to guard them, and the latter's orders were:

"If they attempt to escape, by any means, Scraps, kill them without mercy."

"If you should be surprised, either by Cowboy Pirates or red-skins, just put a bullet in the heads of these men and then escape."

"I'll do it, sahs," was Scraps's reply.

Then, with the renegade between them the Buckskin Brothers rode away in the darkness, with the twenty-four soldiers coming close behind, and Red Wolf bringing up the rear, while Scraps sat down before the row of prisoners, revolver in hand to carry out his orders if need be.

Across the Rio Grande went the party and the renegade acted as guide.

Arriving in the mountains, near the stronghold, the renegade told Night Hawk how to approach the guard, and he rode on alone.

A few moments of silence followed and then came the whistle that had been agreed upon between the brothers.

The party moved on and the outlaw guard was found lying upon the ground, bound hand and foot, and stunned by a severe blow on the head from Night Hawk's revolver.

"He forced me to strike him, as he nearly got the drop on me, though taken by surprise, and it would have ruined all to fire here," said Night Hawk.

"He is only stunned, and the flesh cut," said Broncho Bill dismounting and bending over the man.

Leaving him there, they rode on to the stream.

But the bridge was not down, as it was kept up at night and lowered only at a signal being given.

Going back in the shadow of the canyon, the troopers hid, while the renegade went forward with Broncho Bill.

The latter crouched behind a rock, covered the prisoner with his rifle and said:

"Now, Maze, give the signal."

Instantly the renegade shouted.

"Yo, ho! yo, ho! Bridge down!"

Twice he repeated the words before response came.

Then a voice called out gruffly:

"All right, pard, we is coming."

Two men were now seen coming from the cabins, evidently just aroused from slumber, for all was darkness in the stronghold.

They seized the ropes of the bridge and lowered it, while one asked:

"Who is it, pard."

"Comanche Maze!"

"You is back again?"

"Yes, I had ter come."

The bridge was now lowered, and springing toward it, Broncho Bill gave his famous bugle-call, while at the same time he leveled his revolver at the outlaws.

A cheer answered from Night Hawk and his party, and they came dashing forward.

The outlaws in terror turned to fly, firing at random, but they fell in their tracks.

Leaving a soldier to follow with the renegade, Broncho Bill sprung into his saddle and crowded on after the others.

Surprised, the outlaws sprung from their beds and began to fire.

Instantly a hot fight began; but the scouts and their party won at all points, and, excepting a few outlaws who escaped to the mountains, knowing the ground well, the rest were either killed or captured.

It was a great victory, though both Night Hawk and Broncho Bill were slightly wounded, and three of the soldiers had fallen.

Half a dozen soldiers, too, were more or less wounded.

But the stronghold of the dreaded outlaws was taken, their booty captured, and a large herd of stock was also found in the rock corral.

Not wishing to have daylight find them on Mexican soil, the dead were hastily buried, the wounded put on horses supported by comrades, and the stock was turned loose.

A few horses were laden with the outlaws' booty, and that which could not be taken away was burned.

Then the victors started upon their retreat.

It was not yet dawn when they reached the ford, and Night Hawk said to the renegade:

"Now, Maze, you are free to go your way, and you shall have your arms, your horse and a little money; but, I beg you to give up your evil life, for you see your half-dozen comrades here, with Captain Ku-Klux and the others, will all hang."

"Pard, I is goin' ter reform, and I'll prove it by tellin' yer what I intended ter."

"Is yer willin' ter trust me?"

"Yes."

"Put it thar!"

Night Hawk grasped his hand, and he turned to Broncho Bill, who did the same.

"Pards, when I leaves yer on yer way to ther fort, I is goin' straight back to Red Heart's village, and I'll tell yer for why."

"I'll tell him I was made prisoner and escaped, that Cap'n Ku-Klux and ther gang has been wiped out, so he'd better lie low."

"But, pards, thar is a prisoner thar, one he has had a long time, and who hain't very happy."

"It are a white man."

"He were wounded one day, and he had a pard with him."

"Thet pard went for water, seen Injuns, and was chased off, and returnin', found thet ther red-skins hed been thar, kilt ther wounded man, and ther wolves had nigh eat him up."

"He buried what remained o' ther body, and went his way."

"But thet man had not been kilt."

"Ther red-skins had comed, but one o' em knewed ther wounded man and tuk keer o' him, while it were a renegade white man with 'em, as had been wounded, who was left fer ther wolves when he died."

"T'other man were tuk to ther village, old Red Heart's darter got gone on him, and they saved his life because she became his wife."

"He has tried ter escape, but he are kept under eye all ther time."

"But I kin git him away, and I will, fer he are thet young ranchero they calls Henry Harcourt, and thet nigger o' yours were his pard."

The scouts uttered a cry of joy at this news, and Night Hawk said:

"Maze, bring Henry Harcourt to the fort and I will give you a check I have to spend, for fifteen hundred dollars."

"Pard, I hain't goin' back to no fort."

"But if yer wishes ter meet me and the young gent at ther place whar ther sojers jined us, one week from ter-day, we'll be thar."

"Then I gits, and I accepts yer kindness, only bring me ther money and not ther paper."

"I will, and now you are free to go your way, but we will be there to meet you."

The renegade rode rapidly on ahead, while

the party crossed the river and sought the camp where Scraps awaited them.

There he was, with his prisoners, all safe, and not wishing to camp so near the river, the scouts kept on their way, while Scraps nearly went wild with joy when told that his master, whom he had so long believed dead, whose remains he had taken from where he supposed he had been torn to pieces by wolves, and buried at Ranchero's Rest, his old home, was not the lacerated body of Henry Harcourt after all.

"Missy Clio done kneel by thet grave, and I done pray over it."

"Missy Clio done shed many tears over dat grave, and I did moan over it, and how we is goin' ter laugh tergedder dat it were not Mars' Henry dat lie dere arter all."

"Ah, I is happy dis year ob jubilee!" and Scraps gave vent to a yell of joy that he could not suppress.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

TRUE to his promise, Maze the Renegade kept his appointment with the Buckskin Brothers.

They had pressed as rapidly on as possible to the fort with their prisoners and their wounded men, and given Major Loring a great surprise, as also the entire garrison, when they brought in Captain Ku-Klux, half a dozen of his men, and reported that the outlaw band of Cowboy Pirates was entirely broken up, and the few who had escaped, completely scattered.

After a short rest at the fort, the four Buckskin Pards started for the rendezvous with the renegade.

Night Hawk had written a letter to Clio, in which he told her he hoped soon to see her and bring good news, far better than she had any reason to suspect, and Major Loring had sent a special courier with the letter to mail it at the nearest point.

Upon reaching the rendezvous, the Buckskin Pards saw that the renegade had arrived before them.

Now was he alone, for he said, eagerly:

"I has kept my word, pards, and I does feel good at doing right."

"Here's ther gent, and I'll leave yer and go up inter the mines and try ter live honest."

The one to whom he referred was a tall, soldierly-looking young man of thirty.

He had a handsome face, full of nobility of soul, but very sad in its expression.

He was dressed entirely in Indian costume, and he greeted the scouts in a manner that showed that he appreciated their having gained his release from what had been a cruel captivity, while his meeting with Scraps was most touching indeed, the delighted negro laughing while tears were dimming his eyes.

Night Hawk then paid over the money to Maze, who at once bade all good-by and went off alone over the prairie.

Then, as the party started back for the fort, Henry Harcourt told of his captivity, and heard how the woman he loved had been forced to marry Keene Kennard, the adventurer, and what she had suffered, while she had risked her life to visit his supposed grave.

After a rest of several days at the fort, where Major Loring and his wife gave them welcome, the party started for San Antonio, and there Henry Harcourt and Scraps bade farewell to the Buckskin Scouts, and went northward, for Night Hawk did not feel like leaving home, fearing Indian troubles, and gave to the young ranchero the address of Clio, and where also to find Kennard Kemp.

It was Scraps who broke the news to Clio that her lover still lived, but of the meeting between the two we will not speak.

Soon after Henry Harcourt and Scraps went to New York and dropped in upon Kennard Kemp.

The visit was a surprise to that scamp, and he took the advice given him, hastily packed up and left New York for foreign parts, for to prosecute him would but bring Clio into court, and this was to be avoided.

After seeing Mrs. Kemp set sail, Henry Harcourt and Scraps went to the mines in New Mexico, and when they returned to New York, the old miner accompanied them.

There Harcourt found a letter from the scouts, and it told of the execution of Captain Ku-Klux and his men.

The old miner at once bought a home in the metropolis, furnished it luxuriously, and sent for Clio to come to him as his adopted daughter, and, giving up the stage, she was glad to do so.

One year after she became the wife of Henry Harcourt, and among the guests were Lieu-

tenant-Colonel Willis Loring, for he had been promoted, and his beautiful Mexican wife.

But Night Hawk and Broncho Bill were too much wedded to the prairies to leave their Texan home, yet sent their best wishes and wedding gifts, that both Henry Harcourt and Clio prized far more highly than the numerous costly presents bestowed upon them, for they knew that they owed all of their happiness to the Buckskin Brothers.

THE END.

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